

BAPTISM

What Can We Agree On?

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Down through history, the rite of water baptism has been widely regarded as a symbolic entry into the church. Some baptize infants, and others baptize people only after their confession of belief. Some see baptism as essential for salvation, but others see it as far less important than being spiritually immersed into Christ.

Then there is the mode of baptism. Some sprinkle, some pour, and some immerse. Some baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, while others do so in Jesus' name only.

Because of these many differences, pastor-teacher Bill Crowder takes a look in the following pages at the story and meaning of baptism, and what we can all agree on.

Martin R. De Haan II

A TIME FOR CLARITY

In the April 12, 2006, issue of *USA Today*, I read that “statistics find Americans slowly drifting away from the ancient baptismal ritual.” The article contends that a major Baptist denomination “has seen its rate of baptism fall about 35% from 1972 to 1985.” Then the article went on to say that “the rate stalled for the next 20 years, even though Baptists are pledged to heed the Bible’s ‘great commission’ in Matthew 28:19-20: ‘Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.’”

USA Today added that another large denomination grew “from nearly 1.8 million in 1980 to nearly

2.8 million in 2004. But the total number of baptisms by immersion in water . . . has hovered from around 175,000 to 200,000 yearly.”

With these trends in view, the article’s writer asked, “If baptism is the door into a faith, where did all those people go?”

Yes, where did all the people go? Apparently fewer are going into the waters of baptism. It’s a growing reality in the world of Christendom that baptism is both ignored and misunderstood—a misunderstanding that I can personally relate to.

A FOG OF CONFUSION

I was born into a family that attended a church that practiced infant baptism. As a result, I was sprinkled as a baby. At age 12, following extended catechism classes, I was re-sprinkled as confirmation of that earlier

sprinkling. After high school, however, I found myself wandering aimlessly both personally and spiritually. A well-meaning friend encouraged me to become a Christian as the solution for the drifting that was marking

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out my life. I assumed that, given my church upbringing, I was already a Christian. He explained, however, that I needed to come to church with him and talk to the pastor after the service. I did. The pastor's counsel? "In 2 weeks we will baptize you, and you will be a Christian." Unfortunately, that event of baptism—one

of immersion—did not result in my life being changed.

When I was in my twenties, after I at last heard a clear explanation of what it means to enter the family of God, I received Christ as my Lord and Savior. After trusting Christ, I was told that, once again, I needed to be baptized. But this time it was as a public testimony of my profession of faith in Christ. So, I was baptized by immersion yet again.

I look back over those events with very mixed emotions. After two sprinklings and two immersions, believe me when I say that I understand people's confusion on the matter of water baptism, what it represents, and what it accomplishes. I'm pretty sure many other folks have a story similar to mine in which the matter of baptism is surrounded by a thick fog of confusion.

AN IMPORTANT DISCUSSION

Some might say that baptism is insignificant—an ancient ritual without any modern relevance. But I disagree. The level of confusion surrounding the subject merely amplifies the need for a careful understanding of the issue, if for no other reason than that Jesus Himself made it an issue:

When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him (Mt. 3:16).

[Jesus said], “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). Yes, Christ’s example and

words lift up baptism as an important matter that needs to be carefully thought through and discussed. But where do we begin?

Jesus Himself made baptism an issue.

Perhaps the best place to start is by trying to reconstruct the setting in which Jesus’ audience heard what He said about baptism. Though the events of the Gospels are recorded in the New Testament, Jesus’ audience was made up of people who were still living in a period of Old Testament culture and national law. Therefore, we must begin with what people understood baptism to mean in their time if we are to grasp the framework in which they would have heard and understood Jesus’ command to baptize.

BAPTISM FORESHADOWED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

William Shakespeare, in *The Tempest* (Act 2, Scene 1), wisely said, “What is past is prologue.” He was extolling the value of seeing the events and practices of yesterday as the seeds of today. This is especially helpful in wrestling with the issue of baptism.

From a first-century Jewish point of view, many Bible scholars believe that two practices prepared the way for baptism and help to explain its nature and purpose. One was the practice of the *mikvah* (the ceremonial bath), and the other was the rite of circumcision, which we will consider first.

THE PICTURE OF CIRCUMCISION

From the time of Abram, circumcision was a physical sign of a chosen people’s covenant relationship with God (Gen. 17:11). Although other nations also practiced circumcision, the rite took on a special meaning for the Jewish people. At the very least, it showed that God had a right to order even the most intimate and personal areas of their lives.

Some believe that, in a similar way, baptism later became a sign of a New Covenant for followers of Christ.

It must be understood, however, that these two pictures (circumcision and baptism) are not exact equivalents. Circumcision was to be performed only on males. Baptism is not gender-specific.

In addition, circumcision was done on male infants on the eighth day after their

birth. Baptism, as described in the New Testament, was a public profession of personal faith in Christ. Circumcision was a mark of national identity. New Testament baptism was a sign of entrance into the international body of Christ.

Because of these distinctions, the most we can safely say is that circumcision *foreshadowed* the significance of baptism.

It's also important to see how water baptism was practiced in Jewish culture prior to its New Testament meaning.

THE PRACTICE OF THE MIKVAH

While I was on a trip to Israel, our study group spent several hours at Qumran. An archaeological dig is underway there to unearth the life and culture of the Essene sect, a conservative, ascetic Jewish group in the first century.

As we toured this ancient community, one of the places we examined was an ancient mikvah. In their purification ceremonies, the Jews would descend a set of seven steps into the water, then exit by a different set of steps. This signified that the sins of which they had been cleansed had been left behind in the waters. It was a strategic part of the community life of the Essenes.

Today within Judaism, the purification ceremony of the mikvah (immersion in a ritual bath) is still practiced. Online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* says this of the mikvah:

Its main use nowadays is by Jewish women to achieve ritual purity after menstruation or childbirth, by Jewish men to achieve ritual purity, as part of a traditional procedure for conversion

to Judaism, and (in some cases) for utensils used for eating and cooking.

This ancient practice of ceremonial cleansing is also used as a rite of spiritual conversion. According to Rabbi Maurice Lamm in *Becoming A Jew*:

Immersion, *tevillah*, is the common core component of every [traditional] Jewish conversion process, for male and female, adult and child, ignoramus and scholar. It is *sine qua non*, and a conversion ceremony without immersion is unacceptable to the traditional religious community and simply not Jewish in character.

In addition to the mikvah's use for ceremonial cleansing and conversion, a metaphorical use of the word links the mikvah to the aspirations and hopes of Judaism.

Wikipedia further states:

The Hebrew word *mikvah* also means "hope." The prophet Jeremiah repeatedly refers to this dual meaning in using rain, living water, and the mikvah itself as a symbol of hope in and from God (see Jer. 14:22; 17:13).

Above all, the mikvah expressed the hope that the provider God would care for and meet the needs of His people.

For the first-century Jewish community, all of these ideas could have converged in their understanding of baptism. New Testament followers of Christ would eventually conclude that when it came to baptism, what was past was simply a prologue. From a Christian point of view, one era was coming to an end.

BAPTISM AS PRACTICED BY JOHN

Throughout history, there are individuals who have bridged one era to another. These transitional personalities lived in times of drastic change and were often part of the reason for the change itself.

In the 1960s, the Beatles had that kind of influence, bridging the conservative days of the “Ozzie and Harriet” 1950s to the turmoil-filled 1970s of Vietnam and Watergate. Their music drew young people into radically different ways of thinking, helping to feed the whitewater rapids of change that were being felt in the culture. The Beatles not only reflected that season of change, they also contributed to it, building a bridge from yesterday to tomorrow.

Bridge personalities become human transition points at critical times in history—and John the Baptizer was one of the most strategic “bridge personalities” in the Bible.

BRIDGING FROM OLD TESTAMENT TO NEW TESTAMENT

John the Baptizer was a prophetic voice in the wilderness who had been raised according to strict Nazirite law (Lk. 1:15; Num. 6:1-21). His message was an uncompromising, radical call for personal and national repentance.

At the same time, John was the emissary and forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah King. His calling was to announce the arrival of the One who would bring grace not only to the nation of Israel but to citizens of the whole world.

In this transitional role, John stood on the platform

of his own national and cultural heritage—even as he announced the arrival of a radically new day. His use of baptism as a point of identification for the kingdom, therefore, must be seen in this light.

Notice how John himself explained his baptismal ministry:

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt. 3:11).

What significance did John intend for his baptism, and how did it relate to his message of repentance? *The Jamieson, Fausset, And Brown Bible Commentary* says:

This baptism was at once a public seal of their felt need of deliverance from sin, of their expectation of the coming Deliverer,

and of their readiness to welcome Him when He appeared. The baptism itself startled, and was intended to startle, them. They were familiar enough with the baptism of proselytes from heathenism; but this baptism of Jews themselves was quite new and strange to them.

John's baptism would have been to his countrymen both understandable and mysterious. With the history of the mikvah bath, they would have seen in John's baptism all that was pictured in the mikvah—spiritual cleansing, conversion, and, perhaps most of all, spiritual hope.

The unsettling mystery of John's baptism, however, was signaled in his words that the One who followed him would baptize them "with the Holy Spirit and fire." With these words he

showed a nation that his mission went beyond the moment, beyond the ritual, and beyond the waters of baptism. It pointed them to the coming of their long-predicted Messiah.

A POWERFUL MESSAGE

John's baptism expressed the hopes of prior generations—and even more. Matthew 3 helps us to understand the scope of John's message and his baptism:

A Messianic Announcement

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt. 3:1-2).

The any-moment appearance of the long-awaited Messiah and kingdom of God was to be both the motivator and the aspiration of the people as they submitted to the waters

of baptism. It was not merely about ritual—it was about anticipation.

A Public Confession

Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins (vv.5-6).

John's baptism was an occasion for public confession of personal and national sin. Those who stepped into the waters with him showed their willingness to prepare themselves spiritually for the coming of their King.

A Call For Change

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance (v.8).

John's message of the kingdom and the King reflected a personal readiness not only for a new day but for new ways. His baptism signaled the need for a spiritual revolution.

That's why John's baptism created such a stir—it called people to a transformation of life, and marked them out as those committed to such change. To that end, Mark described the people's response to that call:

Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins (Mk. 1:5).

The launching point of spiritual development for many in the first century came from John's baptism in the waters of the Jordan River. It was a beginning that some of them continued to embrace decades later. Notice:

[Apollus] had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism

of John (Acts 18:25).

[Paul] said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus" (19:3-4).

Perhaps nearly 3 decades later, these individuals were still living out the commitments and decisions made in the Jordan River with John.

JOHN'S BAPTISM OF JESUS

Because John's baptism is linked to confession of sin, one of the surprising events of the New Testament is that Jesus asked John to baptize Him. Matthew tells us:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized

by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:13-17).

The voice from heaven is important. Together with John's own declaration of Jesus' greatness (Jn. 1:29-36), the voice from heaven separates Jesus from everyone else who was

coming to John for baptism.

But why would Jesus submit to this "baptism of repentance"? Historically, conservative Bible teachers have explained that Jesus' baptism was not an acknowledgment of personal wrongdoing but an act by which He showed His willingness to identify with those He came to save. Within this view, Jesus' humility gave the Father in heaven an opportunity to declare that Jesus was unique among those who asked John to baptize them.

Recent studies have offered additional insight. Robert L. Webb, for instance, sees John's baptism as having national implications for Israel. He suggests that John's baptism was signaling the need for a radical national change in view of the coming of God's Messiah. Then he adds:

If this is so, then John was calling for the people

to respond to who they were as a nation, not really who they were as individuals. Of course, it was individuals who had to respond, and many could respond out of a personal sense of responsibility for Israel's state. But equally, many of those in Israel who would be considered faithful could respond out of a belief in and desire for John's reconstituted Israel. Thus, without having to speculate about Jesus' personal state of mind, we can conclude that Jesus did indeed participate in John's baptism, and it was for Him a baptism of repentance. Jesus was acknowledging Israel's sin and need to turn around, and He was committing Himself to do what He could to bring this about (www.bible.org).

If Webb is right, then Jesus stepped into the Jordan River with John to join his generation in a recognition of the need for *national* repentance. His submission to John's baptism, then, showed His own commitment to personally do something about the sins of the

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Regardless of where we land on the issue of defining the scope of John's baptism, however, one thing is indisputable. As the voice from heaven confirmed, Jesus did not ask John to baptize Him as an admission of personal sin but rather to stand with John in anticipation of great spiritual change.

Looking back, we can now see that, in fulfillment of John's message, this was a time of spiritual transition from law to grace, from the Old to the New, from the sacrifices of priests to the sacrifice of the Christ. John's ministry bridged the eras of God's work, leading from the Old Testament understanding of the need for forgiveness—whether national or personal—to the New Testament focus on spiritual cleansing and personal wholeness for individuals, and perhaps, eventually, even the nation.

BAPTISM AS PRACTICED BY CHRIST AND THE APOSTLES

In the days after John's ministry, Jesus and His apostles included baptism in their own public ministries. As we seek to understand the meaning of baptism for ourselves, it's important for us to follow the unfolding story of what it meant to them.

CHRIST'S USE OF BAPTISM

Jesus' Practice Of Baptism. After His baptism by John, Jesus, through His disciples, baptized those who came to Him:

After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized (Jn. 3:22; see 4:2).

While we might speculate that Christ,

like John, baptized in anticipation of the need for personal and national repentance, no details are given about His baptismal message or methods.

Nevertheless, it was such a significant part of His early ministry, that some of the followers of John were so disturbed and threatened by Jesus' practice of baptism that they called it to the prophet's attention:

They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified— behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" (v.26).

John's response was a beautiful expression of the change of heart he was asking of the nation. He replied:

A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me

witness, that I said, "I am not the Christ," but, "I have been sent before Him." He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease (vv.27-30).

Jesus' Picture Of Baptism.

Jesus did not just practice baptism, however. He used the word picture of baptism and the principle behind it when dealing with a problem among His followers.

Two of His disciples (James and John) sent their mother to Jesus to request that, in the kingdom, they be allowed to sit on either side of Christ the King. It was an audacious request that outraged the other disciples. In dealing with the question,

however, Christ did not speak in terms of their audacity—He spoke in terms of the broader spiritual meaning behind the physical act of baptism.

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mk. 10:38).

Here it is clear that Christ was using baptism, along with the cup, as a picture of being fully involved and immersed in what awaited Him. The cup points to Christ's words at the Last Supper in which He took in His hand the cup and told His men that His very life-blood was going to be "shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:28).

He then told them about a coming "immersion" He would face—challenging

them to think about whether they could embrace that baptism. What was it? According to Bible scholar William Hendriksen:

The word "to be baptized" is probably used here in the figurative sense of "to be overwhelmed" by agony. Jesus must be plunged into distress (*The Gospel Of Mark*, p.412).

Could they be fully and completely involved with Him in His suffering? Certainly not. In fact, of the two brothers, James did not even stand with Christ at the cross—let alone allow himself to be "overwhelmed by agony." In reality, they were making a promise that could not withstand the test of being "baptized" into the consequences of that promise.

Jesus' Command To Baptize. Interestingly, as Jesus' personal baptism began His earthly ministry,

some of His final commands include the challenge to His followers to baptize and be baptized:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19).

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

—Jesus (Mt. 28:19)

As part of Christ’s Great Commission to His followers, Jesus regarded baptism as being part of the discipling process. He told His disciples to baptize converts in the “name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Pastor James M. Boice said this of the baptism Christ called for in this commission:

This does not mean that empty rites or ceremonies are to take the place of a vital relationship with Christ. Rather, first, at some point one’s commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord must become public, for baptism is a public act (it is a declaration before the world that a person intends to follow Jesus); and, second, the person is uniting with the church, which is Christ’s visible body. This is both natural and necessary. If a person is truly converted, he or she will want to join with other similarly converted people (*The Gospel Of Matthew, Volume 2, pp.648-649*).

THE APOSTLES' USE OF BAPTISM

When Christ ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives (Acts 1), He left behind a cadre of followers who were committed to the message of the cross. But they were also committed to obeying Christ's instruction about baptism.

Baptism In The Book Of Acts. In the early church, new believers were baptized. This practice began on the Day of Pentecost:

Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." . . . Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them (Acts 2:38,41).

On the day the church was born, baptism became

the external mark of identification for those who had committed their lives to Christ. The imagery of cleansing from the mikvah and the transformational call pictured in John's baptism were foundational to the baptismal practices of the fledgling church.

Verse 38, however, raises a huge question. What does it mean to be baptized "for the remission of sins"? And what are the implications of that statement on salvation by grace through faith?

There's no question that Peter linked repentance and conversion, and then linked baptism to both. The question that has been debated for centuries is how those three relate to one another.

While there continues to be much disagreement about Peter's intended meaning in Acts 2:38, Bible scholar George Ladd gives us some helpful thinking:

Baptism would be the public evidence of [a] repentant spirit . . . The reception of the Holy Spirit is not dependent upon baptism, but it follows baptism which is an outward and visible sign of a penitent spirit. In the early church, converts were baptized without delay. So being baptized and receiving the Spirit were practically simultaneous (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p.1128).

Others have pointed out that when Peter said, "Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins," the word *for* can refer to being baptized "with a view toward" the forgiveness that comes through Christ.

The record of the early church's practice of baptism continues throughout the book of Acts (8:36; 10:47-48; 16:15; 18:8; 19:5), and in

every case it seems to have been the outward public response of those who looked to Christ and His rescue as the source of their forgiveness and new life.

Baptism In Paul's Letters.

More than any other apostle, Paul presented his perspectives on baptism when he wrote about this practice in his own public ministry.

Paul's Own View Of Ministry. While recognizing the important spiritual significance of baptism, Paul apparently did not make baptism a priority of his own public ministry. We see this in his letter to the Corinthians, where he asked those who had developed an unhealthy identification with their own leaders:

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and

Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other (1 Cor. 1:13-16).

Paul baptized only a few people himself. Apparently, he did not want to confuse the grace and salvation of God with the physical act of baptism. His priority was preaching the gospel, not baptizing new believers (v.17).

At the very least, this shows us that Paul did not view baptism as a work necessary for salvation. He saw it as an act of obedience for the redeemed, not as a part of the redemptive transaction.

Paul's Words On "Spirit Baptism."

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or

free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).

Here Paul sees baptism as more than a public rite involving water. If he was referring to water baptism at all in this passage, he was referring to a baptism that physically and publicly illustrated how the Spirit of God has placed us into the body of Christ. His focus was not about being immersed in water or in the Spirit. Rather, his focus was on the fact that we come into relationship with one another by the same Spirit as we place our faith in Christ.

Paul's Teaching On "Baptism Into Christ."

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? (Rom. 6:3).

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27).

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about Spirit baptism, he was clearly speaking of the believer being placed into one body—the body of Christ. In a similar way, in his letter to the Galatians he referred to being baptized “into Christ.” Here Paul was not primarily speaking of being identified with Christ in the eyes of men. Instead, he was emphasizing that in God’s eyes those who have been “baptized into Christ” actually died with Christ when He became our substitute in His death.

Paul’s Statement On Baptism For The Dead.

While Paul wrote to clarify the nature of what it meant to be immersed and washed “in Christ,” sometimes he made statements that are difficult to understand in our own day and culture. For instance, Paul raised an interesting and confusing

thought about baptism when he wrote:

Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead? (1 Cor. 15:29).

This statement has been taken by some to imply that we can be baptized not only as an expression of our own faith but also in behalf of those who have already died.

In reality, however, Paul didn’t tell us what he was referring to when he spoke of baptism for the dead. So it’s dangerous to build a theological position on such an obscure passage.

Because Paul made the comment while emphasizing the importance of a future resurrection of the dead, it’s likely that he was referring to a pagan practice to illustrate belief in an afterlife, without intending to affirm the practice itself.

BAPTISM AS PRACTICED THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

I have already shared my own story of being sprinkled twice and immersed twice. In each case, I was baptized by sincere individuals who believed in both the importance of baptism and in the significance of how and why it was performed.

These practices, however, have come down to us through the filters of church history. The New Testament itself doesn't give explicit details on the process or technique that is to be used in baptizing. As a result, when the church splintered and divided into sects and denominations over the centuries, the practice and purpose of baptism was repeatedly reinvented to

accommodate the nuances of the different groups. This resulted in three basic modes of baptism:

BAPTISM BY IMMERSION

Baptism by immersion is practiced in a variety of ways, but all with one significant common thread—the person being baptized is placed into the water, then brought out again.

Adherents of immersion point to the fact that in its original language, the word *baptize* means literally “to place into.” Additionally, they declare that immersion is the mode of baptism that most completely portrays the story of our salvation. They explain that being placed into the water pictures our death and burial with Christ, just as coming up out of the water illustrates our resurrection with Him to a new life and relationship with God.

BAPTISM BY POURING

In pouring, those being baptized stand in water (often a natural setting of a creek, pond, or river), and have water poured over their heads. Here the picture is one of being washed and cleansed by the Spirit and work of Christ on our behalf.

Excavations of ancient baptistries and the artwork of third-century Christian catacombs show early Christians being baptized in just that way. Many today hold this archaeological evidence as the definitive reason for practicing baptism by pouring.

BAPTISM BY SPRINKLING

Sprinkling seems to have the most recent history. It appears to have originated following the apostolic era and continues today in many Christian denominations, especially

among those that practice infant baptism. For support of this position, some see evidence in Isaiah 52:13-15, which reads:

Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men; so shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; for what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider.

Baptism by sprinkling is also used in parts of the world where lack of water is a critical issue.

BAPTISMAL VARIATIONS

The differences in baptismal practices go beyond the mode of baptism, however.

In some traditions, warm water is preferred to cold water (or vice versa); in others, the water must be moving. In some practices, the baptismal candidate wears a robe; in others, they are required to wear regular street clothes. Some of these practices have to do with practical concerns (such as modesty), while others seem more connected to convenience than conviction.

There seems to be no end to the nuances and intricacies of method, yet quite often each group implicitly or explicitly believes that they are following the New Testament pattern.

Admittedly, I have also followed a similar pattern of conviction. Over a period of more than 20 years, I served as a pastor in three different churches in three different regions of the United States. All of those churches were

baptistic in tradition and conviction. I practiced baptism by immersion, however, not because I pastored baptistic churches. Rather, I pastored baptistic churches because I felt that immersion is the mode that best pictures baptism according to the New Testament descriptions.

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But I must say that while I still hold that view, I do not believe that all followers

of Christ must be held to the standard of my own convictions. My fear is that out of a genuine desire to be thoroughly biblical, we could find ourselves becoming slaves to the “letter of the law” while potentially missing the “spirit of the law” in our practice of baptism.

So then, what would be “the spirit of the law”?

WHAT IS THE POINT OF BAPTISM?

The online encyclopedia *AllExperts* gives us an interesting analysis of the current Christian perspective on baptism:

Today, water baptism is most readily identified with Christianity, where it symbolizes the cleansing (remission) of sins, and the union of the believer with Christ in His death,

burial, and resurrection so that he becomes one of Christ’s faithful. Most Christian groups practice some form of literal water-based baptism and agree that it is important, yet strongly disagree with other groups regarding any or all of several aspects of baptism, such as:

- form of the baptism
- recipients of baptism
- meaning/effects of the act of baptism

However, a few Christian groups assert that water-based baptism has been supplanted by the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit, and water baptism was unnecessarily carried over from the early Jewish Christian practice.

I find this to be a good summary of the present state of Christendom when it comes to our modern approach to the

ancient practice of baptism. If nothing else, it helps us to see that there is a need for both personal integrity and shared grace in the way we practice or do not practice baptism.

Regardless of our view, it should be clear that baptism has a rich history and is tied to the truths of our life in Christ.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Without question, few books are as committed to using picture and imagery as the Bible. From Jesus' use of parables to the vast array of metaphor and imagery, the Bible is without question a book of pictures.

For that reason, we often find ourselves not asking, "What does the Bible say?" but "What does the Bible mean by what it says?" For example, the Bible says that

we are to practice the Lord's Table, but the *meaning* of the bread and cup of that celebration is to proclaim the Lord's death until He returns (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Likewise, Jesus used a series of "I am" statements to make word pictures of the various aspects of His coming: a door (picturing the way to the Father), living water (that which satisfies), and the bread of life (that which feeds our deepest needs), to name just a few.

This use of a word picture also applies to our understanding of baptism. We need to understand the words, but we must also see the picture that was being painted by those words.

WHAT BAPTISM MEANS

In the New Testament, Koine Greek (the universal language of the day) was used to communicate the truths of the gospel. It is

helpful to notice that *baptizo* was the word from which we get the term *baptize*.

“Those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”
—Acts 2:41

Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance gives this definition of *baptizo*:

A rite of immersion in water as commanded by Christ, by which one after confessing his sins and professing his faith in Christ, having been born again by the Holy Spirit unto a new life, identifies publicly with the fellowship of Christ and the church.

Notice that while the defined mode is seen as immersion, the point of the definition is that baptism is clearly a declaration of faith by someone who has already trusted Christ. In the New Testament, this is the critical point in every case. For example:

Those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them (Acts 2:41).

When they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. . . . Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” Then 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." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him (Acts 8:12,36-38).

Repeatedly, the book of Acts indicates that, above all else, baptism is the public act by which individuals declare their personal confidence in the saving work of Christ. Though the New Testament does not give us clear procedures for baptism, it does give us clear understanding of what the picture of baptism means.

WHAT THE PICTURE OF BAPTISM MEANS

So what is actually being displayed or pictured when a follower of Christ submits to baptism?

Public Declaration Of Faith. I find it interesting that in the early church, lacking the modern

conveniences of indoor baptistries, baptisms almost always occurred outside. Today we still speak of baptism as being a public declaration of faith in Christ. In many ways, though, our practice is less public and more of a private declaration given within the family of faith. In either case, however, baptism is a way of proclaiming our personal faith to others.

Admittedly, baptism is not the only way of making a public declaration of faith. Church membership, catechism, confirmation, and a variety of other denominational variations on the theme are used as "virtual equivalents" that can fulfill the need for a public declaration.

What we can all agree on is that Jesus asked us to declare our faith publicly. We see this clearly when He said, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will

also confess before My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32).

Portrayal Of The Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul wrote:

I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

In a sense, when combined with the Lord’s Table, baptism helps to present a rich picture of the message that was delivered to Paul and has been handed down to us. In the elements of the Lord’s Supper we have a visual reminder of how Christ died for our sins. In baptism, especially with immersion, Christ’s burial and resurrection is pictured when new life is declared in the child of God.

A Heart Of Personal Trust. We have already seen that Christ instructed His disciples to baptize those who embrace Him by faith (Mt. 28:19-20). When we submit to baptism as believers, we are following a custom that for 2,000 years has set Christians apart. It’s a simple yet profound act by which we declare to Christ and to the world that we have given ourselves to the One who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Identification With Resurrection.

In the traditions where immersion is practiced, this is graphically seen. Notice what we find in the apostle Peter’s first New Testament letter:

There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God),

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him (1 Pet. 3:21-22).

In baptism, we identify with and proclaim our confidence in the truth of Christ's resurrection. It's a powerful demonstration of what Christ has done for us in conquering death, hell, and the grave for all who come to Him by faith.

A TEST CASE

A friend of mine pastors a church that practices baptism by immersion. Recently, however, friends who attend his church told me of a baptismal service that was, for them, very unusual.

A man had come to Christ and had asked to be baptized. But he had significant health and

disability issues. In my own experience, I have seen cases where individuals in wheelchairs were carried—sometimes wheelchair and all—into the baptistry so the new follower of Christ could be baptized. But this pastor wisely asked, “Is that necessary?” He was wondering whether the method was as important as the heart. I think he was wise to remember that the point of baptism is to be a public identification with Christ that needs to be practiced with consideration for those who choose to declare their faith in Jesus.

After careful and prayerful consideration, this pastor and his leadership team agreed that the importance of the heart and spirit surpassed the importance of the mode. The result was that a baptism by sprinkling took place in a church that was committed to baptism by immersion.

Some would see this as compromise. I saw it as refreshing. It seems to be a wise and appropriate application of Paul's ancient words of instruction to the Roman church:

Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom. 14:4-5).

Paul wrote those words in a day when there probably was agreement about the practice of baptism. But some had become involved in divisive debates about whether followers of Christ should participate in the holy days and festivals of ancient Israel.

I have become convinced

that this same application of wisdom can also give us counsel in considering our differences in the area of baptism. We have seen that baptism is not an issue that

Baptism is not an issue that determines eternity. It's an act of public faith and trust in Christ—an outward symbol of an inner change.

determines eternity. It's an act of public faith and trust in Christ—an outward symbol of an inner change. We can celebrate that intent if we will “let each be fully convinced in his own mind.”

DOES BAPTISM STILL MATTER TODAY?

Today, the practice of baptism has often become disconnected from its ancient intent.

Nevertheless, the principle and truth behind baptism still matters for many reasons. Perhaps most specifically, it matters because, as in the first century, if we accept Christ as our personal Savior and Lord, we are called upon to declare our personal faith. It's more than a duty or an act of obedience, it's an opportunity to declare our gratitude for the love and grace of Christ.

If you have trusted Jesus as your own Savior, baptism gives you an opportunity to tell others that your life has been changed. You can say of Christ, "I am His and He is mine."

If you have not

been baptized since your conversion, I encourage you to talk with your pastor or a spiritual mentor and discuss this important issue. Christ was baptized with suffering and death for us. Now we are given the privilege of responding to His gift with our own personal declaration of faith.

“Those who gladly received his word were baptized.”

—Acts 2:41

The book of Acts declares that on the Day of Pentecost, “Those who gladly received his word were baptized” (2:41). You can join them in this joyful act of obedience, identification, and proclamation of Christ’s salvation. Yes, the real meaning and message of baptism still matters today.

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