

## WATER BAPTISM

### What is water baptism?

The word “baptize” (baptizo) means to dip, sink, or plunge, i.e. immerse. Baptism first appears in the New Testament in conjunction with the ministry of John the Baptist. People came to hear John the Baptist preach and as an expression of their *repentance* from sin they were baptized by being immersed in a river. This act of being immersed in the water symbolized being washed clean from sin. John’s baptism was also an act of *preparation* for the coming of Messiah (Mk 1:4-8). Indeed, Jesus’ public ministry was inaugurated with His being baptized by John (Mk 1:9). John declared that Jesus would also baptize, but, with the Holy Spirit.

### Why should believers be baptized?

I offer four reasons:

1. The significance of the meaning of the act. Water baptism is a physical act performed by man symbolizing a spiritual act performed by Jesus Christ. It is typically referred to as an ordinance or sacrament. Being baptized with water is a public profession that illustrates the spiritual realities of being cleansed from our sin, of being clothed with Christ by identification with His death and resurrection, and of our being initiated into the body of Christ (Rom 6:3-5; Gal 3:26-29; I Cor 12:12-13).
2. The example of Jesus. Three of the gospel writers record the baptism of Jesus. Submitting to baptism demonstrated and effected Jesus’ identification with sinful men and also gave testimony to the binding obligation of the ordinance. Disciples should emulate their master. Thus, since Jesus was baptized, as His follower I should be baptized as well.
3. The command of Jesus. In His great mission mandate to the disciples Jesus’ commission includes, “...*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...*” (Mt 28:19-20). Obedience is a mark of discipleship.
4. The practice of the early church. From the Apostle Peter’s first sermon and on through the rest of the book of Acts we find that each and every time someone believes in Jesus, their profession of faith is followed by the act of water baptism (Acts 2:38-41; 8:12-13; 9:17-19; 10:44-48; 16:14-15; 16:30-33; 18:8). It did not occur to the first generation of Christians to declare their faith in Christ without submitting to water baptism.

### Who is eligible for baptism?

Surveying the Scripture references just cited from Acts, we observe that every time water baptism takes place, it follows belief in the gospel message by the ones being baptized. For example, the baptism of Lydia and her household comes after she had listened to Paul’s teaching, “*and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul*” (Acts 16:14-15). In other words, only those who have experienced

baptism by the Holy Spirit (i.e. spiritual rebirth, conversion) are eligible to be baptized by water. Thus, my view which is called “believers’ baptism” insists that only those who have placed their faith in Christ should be baptized. To quote my seminary theology professor, Dr. Robert Culver, “Many will agree, therefore, that baptism ought to follow regeneration and that only those showing credible evidence of new birth ought to be baptized”. While I understand the uncertainty we may share as parents concerning the authenticity of the faith of our younger children who ask to be baptized, I nonetheless have concluded that many children can have a genuine faith and that water baptism should not be withheld from them. Patient counsel and instruction from parents and church leaders should be exercised when considering young baptismal candidates.

There are many sincere Christians who engage in the practice of “paedobaptism” (the baptizing of infants). Their reasons are usually stated as follows: (a) baptizing infants is the New Covenant counterpart to the Old Covenant sign of circumcising male infants which identified the infant with the covenant community of faith (Israel). Col 2:11-12 is cited where there is mention of circumcision and baptism in the same context. (b) it is recorded that entire households were baptized, thus, there must have been infants in some of those households. (c) baptizing infants has strong historical precedent in the history of the church, being the predominant practice beginning in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and for many centuries to follow. (d) baptizing infants provides a meaningful way for parents to entrust their infant children to the Lord and make a public acknowledgment of their own spiritual responsibilities.

With brevity I respond to the points above: (a) baptizing infants is not commanded in the NT as circumcision was in the OT. It would seem that the more accurate counterpart to OT circumcision of the flesh is the NT circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:28-29). (b) this is an argument from silence, we do not know for certain from the Biblical texts that there were infants in the household, and if there were, are we to suppose they awakened them some time after midnight,, as in Acts 16:33? (c) there is much to learn from church history but not all historical practices have Biblical support. (d) a ceremony of child/parent dedication can accomplish these same purposes.

### *How is water baptism administered?*

According to the meaning of the word (baptizo) and the obvious practice of the NT, baptism is by immersion in a body of water. This is my standard practice even as I affirm along with Luther (a paedobaptist!) that immersion best pictures the spiritual meaning. But, I see the mode as secondary to the meaning of the symbol, therefore I would consent to sprinkle or pour as a means of baptism for someone who finds immersion untenable due to physical or psychological obstacles.