

## Baptism

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that ... ” baptism is required of a Christian. (If Jane Austen is allowed to make such a sweeping statement, then so can I, but there is bound to be someone who will dissent!) The fact is that Jesus Himself was baptised by John the Baptist, even though John protested that they were doing it the wrong way round, and it should be Jesus doing the baptising. The injunction to be baptised is given many times in the New Testament, often linked with the necessity for repentance, and the true Christian will wish to obey.

The word ‘baptism’ derives from sources indicating washing, both by immersion and in a ceremonial sense. The Bible uses the word symbolically, exemplifying the washing away of a person’s sins. It is also careful to explain that baptism is: “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God”, *i.e.* baptism itself doesn’t actually wash away sins, but that it is an act which indicates that this has been done. It follows after repentance and faith, and is the way Christians publicly stand up to be counted.

Jesus said, “Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Baptism is the way we can show the world that we are not ashamed to belong to our Lord and Saviour.

John the Baptist preached “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”, and large numbers responded, confessing their sins and receiving forgiveness from God. This was preparation for greater things to

follow. As John testified about the coming Messiah, “I indeed have baptized you with water: but He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

Just before His ascension back into Heaven, Jesus confirmed His promise to the apostles that they were to be baptised with the Holy Spirit, and pointed out its imminence. Accordingly, on the day of Pentecost, this took place to the amazement of a great crowd of people, resulting in about three thousand being baptised. This also was a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, together with the assertion that they would “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. But there lies a significant difference from the baptism of John the Baptist, in that these were baptised “in the name of Jesus Christ”. This was consistent with the great commission given by Jesus to the disciples, recorded at the end of the gospel according to Matthew, when they were commanded to go to all nations, “baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

While the vast majority of Christians are agreed about the necessity for baptism, there is a difference of opinion about the method to be used. Where the Scriptures are explicit, there is a right and wrong way to proceed, but regarding the method of baptism we have to depend on inferences. There are two main groups of thought on the subject. One claims that baptism is exclusively by the total immersion of the body in water by consenting individuals, and the other practises the baptism of infants, usually by the sprinkling of water on their heads, being followed later by conscious consent expressed as an act of confirmation of their baptism.

The first group point out that any references to baptism in the Bible suggesting method indicate consent and a plentiful supply of water, such as a river, as would be required for total immersion. This immersion symbolises the death and resurrection of Christ, and the believer's association with these events. The second group infer that where whole households were baptised, they almost certainly contained babies and young children. They also draw comparisons with the Old Testament practice of circumcision, which has been replaced by the ordinance of baptism, and of symbolic cleansing by the sprinkling of blood. There is also the similarity of baptism with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit from above.

I used to think that the practice of infant baptism originated simply from a natural human inclination to do the best for one's children when they were unable to make the most important decision in life for themselves, just in case they died before reaching an age where their understanding was sufficiently developed to make a choice of their own. Now I am rather more inclined to believe that there are possibly valid Biblical grounds for such a procedure.

Both methods ultimately rely on symbolism and consent, and thus fulfil the spirit of baptism, which is to stand up and be counted as the people of God. While I am personally inclined towards the first group in cases where total immersion is possible, I feel strongly that both groups should have sufficient grace to tolerate and respect the opinions of the other, having so much else in common as fellow Christians. The important thing is to be baptised, whatever the method used. Whether by believer's baptism, or by infant baptism and a subsequent competent confirmation, we are

all indicating that we are the redeemed of God, and not ashamed to show it.

The Bible says, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus."