

Salvation: Here A Little; There A Little

A Historical Survey of Water Baptism

Introduction

Most denominations and religions do not have view of water baptism that matches that of scripture and the early church. We have already studied how that Jesus, Peter, Paul, John, and virtually every early apostolic preacher taught water baptism in the name of Jesus as essential for salvation. By being baptized into Christ, we obeyed His death and thus water baptism is a part of obeying the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the scriptures teach that it is necessary for salvation¹:

Mark 16:16 *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

1 Peter 3:21 *Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,*

The scriptures also teach that water baptism is for the forgiveness and “washing away” of sins:

Acts 2:38 *And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

Acts 22:16 *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'*

Moreover, the word for “baptize” in the Greek, is *baptizo*, which means, “to immerse, to completely cover, or to bury.” When spoken of in the New Testament scriptures, baptism always refers to complete immersion. In reference to water baptism, it always means to be completely immersed, covered, or buried in water. As we will see, sprinkling was not invented until centuries after the time of Christ and only after false doctrines had crept into the majority of churches. In this lesson we seek to catalog apostolic teachings of water baptism throughout the Bible and to identify when exactly and why these original teachings began to change to morph into the many widespread practices of today.

Old Testament Typology

We will not spend much time here as we have already lingered long in this area throughout these Bible studies, but there are many types and shadows of water baptism and its significance throughout the Old Testament scriptures. These include:

The Flood of Noah's Day – Peter said that this was a type of water baptism in that all of the filth and sin of the world was washed away and this process of covering that sin at the same time saved those who had acted in faith to God's Word, namely Noah's family². The Flood was a “cleaning of the slate” and a “starting over” for the earth and water baptism is certainly that as well!

It is interesting to note that everything that God used in judgment throughout the Old Testament and beyond, He now uses in salvation. The Flood of Noah's day now corresponds to the waters of baptism which wash our sins away. Furthermore, God used causing men to suddenly speak in a different language at the tower of Babel as punishment for their lack of obedience and to separate them as God had commanded. In the book of Acts, He caused men to speak in another tongue as they received the Holy Spirit, and this had the effect of taking men of all nations and pulling them together in one church. In the end, God will again destroy the earth, but this time by fire, and the Holy Ghost is represented as a “baptism of fire.”

1

The italics in these verses are inserted to highlight the pertinent parts.

² See 1 Peter 3:20-21.

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The Red Sea Crossing of Exodus – Paul referred to the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea and the subsequent burial of Pharaoh’s army in the water as “baptism unto Moses.”³ Certainly water baptism today, takes the blood of Jesus and erases the pasts that would seek to follow us and destroy us, giving us a new start!

The Washings of Water of Mosaic Law – There are many types and shadows of baptism in the Laws of Moses, these include the priests washing at the brazen laver and changing their garments on the Day of Atonement, and the cleansing of the leper ceremonies.

The Healing of Naaman – When the Syrian general sought help from the prophet, he was commanded to go dip seven times in the Jordan river. This seemingly simple command went against what he was expecting but when he obeyed, he was cleansed of his leprosy. In the same way, so many people argue today against water baptism and the very reason that they are having to invent excuses and arguments against it is a sign that it is very much a Biblical mandate. Just get into the water and see that simple obedience is very, very effective!

Elijah’s Showdown on Mt. Carmel – When the prophet challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose God would answer with fire, Elijah built an altar, covered it thoroughly with water, and then God responded by sending a fire that consumed the sacrifice, water, and altar. This is a beautiful type of repentance, water baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Jonah’s Fish Story – When Jonah ran from the will of God, it took being completely submerged in the sea and spending three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish to bring about a turnaround in his spiritual direction. This was symbolic of Jesus’ time in the tomb, but is also symbolic of water baptism. Before his immersion, Jonah was headed away from the will of God and afterwards he was willing to go toward the will of God. So should it be with us!

New Testament Before Calvary

By the era of New Testament, water baptism was a common ritual among the Jewish people to identify pupils who sat under the influences of various rabbis and teachers. It was very common for the brightest of young scholars to devote themselves to the teachings of various wise men and it was common for those wise men to “baptize” their scholars. This baptism was a physical representation that the disciple was submitting themselves to the instruction and philosophy of that teacher.

When John the Baptist came along as the forerunner of Christ, he began to baptize people “unto repentance.”

Matt 3:11 "I baptize you with water for 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 with fire.

Essentially, John the Baptist taught that the long awaited Messiah was soon to come and that men and women needed to prepare their lives in readiness for Him. When people believed the teachings and preaching of John the Baptist, they repented of their sins and were baptized as showing that they believed what he was saying and that they were anxiously awaiting the Messiah. When Jesus Christ showed up, John proclaimed, “here He is: the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Jesus Christ allowed Himself to be baptized for many reasons, but one was to validate John’s ministry and preaching. Jesus Christ being baptized by John was a very graphic and vivid way for Jesus to say, “I believe that what John is preaching about me is true!”

When Jesus began His public ministry, He took this common practice and used it as a practice to identify people as following Him. It is very interesting to note that Jesus, Himself, never actually baptized anyone:

3

See 1 Corinthians 10:2.

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John 4:1-2 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples),

This scripture is very important for several points. First, Jesus was very aggressive in His followers being baptized, so much so that more people were baptized into Jesus' name than John the Baptist had baptized unto repentance! Many casual readers of the Bible miss this salient point, that throughout all of the three and a half years of Jesus' life, people were being baptized as a sign that they believed in Jesus' teachings and had become one of His disciples, and were being baptized in "Jesus' name."

The second interesting point is that only the disciples of Jesus baptized people and Jesus, Himself, baptized none. Obviously, Jesus did not want people today using the excuse of "if Jesus could baptize me, then I would get baptized but since He's not here in bodily form, I won't." From the very beginning, Jesus used His disciples who were His ministers to baptize everyone. Who baptized the first disciples? The Bible doesn't explicitly record this, but it is obvious from this scripture that they must have baptized each other. This teaches us that it matters little who baptizes a person and matters most that the person has faith and that they are baptized in obedience to the commands of scripture. In other words, if the person being baptized believes and obeys, it matters very little the spiritual condition or the name of the person who orally invokes the name of Jesus over them. This point also helps explain why in the book of Acts, we never find Peter and the original 120 who received the Holy Ghost in the upper room getting baptized in the name of Jesus as Peter commanded others to do: they had all already been baptized in the name of Jesus when they first began following Christ.

New Testament After Calvary

At His ascension, Jesus gathered together His closest followers and gave them final instructions which was basically a recap of what He had already been teaching them. The various Gospels record these final moments of Jesus' earthly life and water baptism figured prominently:

Mark 16:15-16 And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Luke 24:46-47 and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

A quick comparison of the phrases of this command and what Peter preached in Acts 2:38 will reveal that "forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name" is a reference to water baptism. When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, he was obeying this commandment and proclaimed, "be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins." He preached this first in Jerusalem.

Matt 28:18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus commanded His disciples to teach people to observe "all that I have commanded you." Which included, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is important to realize that this is not a baptismal formula being called out over someone in the water, but rather a command given to disciples who were to go obey. Furthermore, this was not a change of teaching, but just a reiteration of what Christ had been teaching the disciples all along. Moreover, the disciples had already been baptizing "in the name of Jesus" and they obviously understood this command of Jesus as direction to keep doing the same because throughout the rest

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of the New Testament people were always baptized only “in the name of Jesus.” When Peter stood up with the twelve – which included Matthew, the writer of the verses above – he proclaimed, “be baptized in the name of Jesus.” Glancing back to Matthew 28:19, we realize that there is no discrepancy or contradiction here because the singular name – notice that Jesus did not say “nameS” – of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is Jesus! For example, the angel told Joseph:

Matt 1:21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

“Son” is a title, but His name would be called “Jesus.” In the same manner, “Father” is a title also and that is why Jesus said:

John 5:43 I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him.

Jesus said that He came in “my Father’s name.” What name did Jesus “come in”? Obviously the name of the Father must be Jesus. Jesus also said:

John 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

“Holy Spirit” is a title, but He would come in “Jesus’ name.” When Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost and when the disciples subsequently throughout the rest of the New Testament period baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, they were obeying what Jesus meant when He commanded them, “baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” They did not repeat what He said, but rather they fully obeyed it!

Most denominations today baptize saying, “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This is a grave error, because it repeats the commandment without actually obeying it. A friend of mine recently taught a Bible Study on water baptism to some military personnel and used this analogy⁴:

Many people gravely err by ignoring the context of Matthew 28:19 and the many other scriptures on water baptism throughout the Bible. When a command is given, it is important to understand the context of the command in order to fully obey. For example, in the military, there is a term, “hit the rack” which means “to go to bed and go to sleep.” A civilian may not be familiar with the term, but within the military the expression is very common. If the general sent us orders and told us, “we are to immediately hit the rack” and if he came and found us still very much awake and outside with a shelf and a stick and beating it repeatedly, he would be very much upset because although we took action at his order, we did not properly understand the commandment and therefore did not obey what he meant. Although we took action in response to the command, we actually disobeyed the commandment because we did not take it in context within which it was given.

In the same way, people who are baptized with a minister saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” have taken action in regards to the commandment of Jesus, but because of their lack of understanding of the context and failure to take all of the scriptural teachings on the subject in account, they have actually disobeyed the commandment because they have not invoked the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, which is Jesus! We must not just repeat the commandment, but obey it! And the Biblical response to this command is to be baptized in the name of Jesus. Let’s prove that scripturally from the actions and preaching of the apostles and disciples:

Acts 2:38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Gracious thanks to Bro. Ed Hancock for this!

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This commandment was given to the Jews at Jerusalem: "be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins!" The disciples' message did not change when they preached to half-Jew, half-Gentiles, the Samaritans:

Acts 8:14-16 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

They had been baptized by Phillip "in the name of the Lord Jesus." When the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles and non-Jews were added to the church, they were baptized the same way:

Acts 10:45-48 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Peter commanded the Gentiles with the same command that he had given everyone else: "be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ!" Paul not only agreed but re-baptized some disciples of John who had only known John's baptism of repentance:

Acts 19:1-6 And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. 2 And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." 4 And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

In this case, we have the scriptural example that people if they have been baptized one way that did not fully obey the teachings of the scripture, then they should be re-baptized in the name of Jesus by full immersion! Paul, Himself – then called Saul – was baptized this way by Ananias:

Acts 22:16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

The references do not stop here, because James wrote about some people who spoke against the early church and said:

James 2:7 Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

Virtually every Bible scholar today recognizes that this is a reference to water baptism and the name that was called over the early church believers, the name of Jesus.

The church in Rome was baptized this way as well. Paul wrote:

Rom 6:3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

How were they baptized? "Into Christ Jesus!" We find this in the Corinth church also:

1 Cor 1:13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

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The obvious answer to Paul's rhetorical questions is that "no, Paul was not crucified for you, Jesus was" and "No, you were not baptized in the name of Paul, but rather in the name of Jesus." Through even casual references throughout the New Testament, we find that the apostles always baptized "in the name of Jesus!" In fact, there is no scriptural record of anyone being baptized any other way in scripture after Calvary except by complete immersion, in the name of Jesus Christ. That is, the "name of Jesus Christ" was orally invoked by the one doing the baptism.

After the New Testament Era

We have many writings of very prominent leaders of the church in the post- Apostolic eras. From a careful study of these writings, we can trace the development of modern practices and see what the prevailing practices were of the years that followed in the church history. Immediately after the death of the disciples and the last of the twelve, John, the men mentioned in scripture such as John Mark, Timothy, and Titus took the helm of leadership of the Apostolic church. These men preached and lived and taught the same doctrines of their mentors, Peter and Paul, and only baptized by full immersion in the name of Jesus Christ.

Immediately after this generation, were men such as Ignatius, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, and Hermas. All believed that Jesus was the one God of the Old Testament and all baptized in the name of Jesus only with no mention of "baptism in titles" in any of their works. For example, Hermas wrote in the early second century of "baptism in the name of the Lord" and said, "if you bear His name but possess not His power, it will be in vain that you bear His name."⁵

The earliest deviation from baptizing "in the name of Jesus Christ" is found in a writing of Justin Martyr's dating from about A.D. 150. Justin Martyr believed a heretical view that Jesus was not Almighty God and was a second person created by God and who was under and subordinate and not as powerful as God. To reflect his heretical view on this matter, Justin tinkered with the baptismal formula and wrote:

"For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then received the washing with water."⁶

It should be noted that Trinitarians are not all that thrilled that the first mention of a sort of form of their baptismal formula is found in the writings of a man whom they do not agree with theologically, and that he included the name, "Jesus Christ" in it. We should also note that Justin did not believe in a trinity and that concept would not be formulated and created until well into the fourth century.

In the third century, we know from the writings of Cyprian that the most common formula of water baptism still being used was "in the name of Jesus." In his arguments with Stephen, Bishop of Rome, Cyprian clearly mentions baptism in the name of Jesus many, many times and most scholars agree that the vast majority of churches of the day still baptized in the name of Jesus Christ despite the earlier works by Justin Martyr.

Verification of this comes from a work entitled *A Treatise on Re-Baptism by An Anonymous Writer* which dates from the fourth century and was probably written by a monk named Ursinus. In it he discussed what should be done about those, "who, although baptized in heresy, have yet been baptized in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" and who turn from "their heresy" to the newly formed Catholic church. He argues that in such cases re-baptism is not necessary because: "Heretics who are already baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ must only be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Obviously, even as the Nicene councils were inventing the doctrine of trinity and the formation of the Roman Catholic church, many – and some scholars would say "most" – people held to water baptism in the name of Jesus and many were still receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit as in the book of Acts.

⁵ See Hermas, *The Pastor [The Shepherd]*, 1.3.7, 3.9.13, and 3.9.16.

⁶ See Justin, *First Apology*, 61.

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With the councils of Nicea in A.D. 321, the official “catholic church” stance became to enforce the concept of a plurality of persons in the Godhead and for the first time, Matthew 28:19 was cited as a baptismal formula supposedly “proving” the new doctrine of the Trinity. Despite this, many people still baptized “in the name of Jesus” saying, “baptism in the name of one of the Trinity is the same as baptism in the whole of the Trinity.”⁷

In the council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, the formula of the Trinity was finalized and the commandment was issued that the believer be taught the doctrine of three separate persons in the Trinity and that they be baptized by triple immersion in the titles, that is saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The Medieval Age was one of great decline spiritually and doctrinally and the Catholic church gradually introduced infant baptism and then sprinkling and then began to teach “baptism of blood” which stated that if a person died a martyr, that their death was their baptism and they did not have to be baptized in water. Despite such dogged views as putting to death anyone that disagreed with them, throughout this time we find mention of people who still baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. For example, in a letter to Antioch, the church in Constantinople condemned “Jesus name baptism” around A.D. 450 and the “Justinian Code of A.D. 529” did the same, declaring the death penalty for those who participated in those who rebaptized people into “antitrinitarianism.” Martin Damium, bishop of Braga who died in A.D. 579, condemned those who baptized, “retaining single immersion under a single name.”

Bede (A.D. 673-735) of England accepted the validity of baptism in Jesus’ name as did the Council of Frejus (A.D. 792) and Pope Nicholas I (A.D. 858-867). Other writers mentioned the baptismal formula of “in the name of Jesus Christ” including Peter Lombard (died A.D. 1160), Hugo Victor (died A.D. 1141), and Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-1274). It is obvious despite the corruption of doctrine in many areas throughout Medieval times, that God had a remnant somewhere who held to original scriptural teachings during this time.

When the Reformation hit, many 16th and 17th century groups went back to baptizing in obedience to the scriptural formulas. Most of the Antitrinitarians baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for example, in 1572, George Schomann was baptized “in the name of Christ” and in 1646, Thomas Edwards wrote about some believers who taught that baptizing using the words Father, Son, and Holy Ghost was a man-made tradition and that Christian baptism was “only in the name of Jesus Christ.” Michael Servetus, in the mid 1500s was burned at the stake for saying “Jesus is the Father” and baptizing only in the name of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, many of the Plymouth Brethren and other English groups whose offshoots would come to America believed in “Jesus’ name baptism” and often quoted Acts 2:38 as scriptural support. William Penn, who would found the colony of Pennsylvania, taught only baptism in Jesus’ name. Many early Quakers in colonial times taught the same. Throughout the 1800s and increasing in the 1900s, there have been many groups both in America and England and throughout the world who baptize only in the name of Jesus, choosing to bypass Catholic church theology and return to the roots of the original apostolic church of scripture.

Conclusion

Jesus took the common ritual of water baptism of His day and elevated it to be a vital part of obeying His Gospel. We are “buried with Christ” through water baptism⁸. Jesus told Nicodemus:

John 3:5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The original apostles and five centuries of church leadership after the time of the New Testament interpreted being “born of the water” to water baptism and being “born of the Spirit” to receiving the Holy Spirit. And the original

⁷ See the works of St. Ambrose (A.D. 340-398).

⁸ See Colossians 2:12.

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apostolic church not only taught the validity of water baptism for salvation and the washing away of sins, but were very specific in how they baptized: they only baptized candidates who were old enough to believe in Christ for themselves and to have repented, they only baptized by complete immersion in water, and they only baptized by orally invoking “in the name of Jesus Christ” thus exactly following the commandments of Christ. Only when a Trinitarian concept of God was formulated in the late fourth century did most churches change to baptizing saying, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” This was usually administered with triple immersion, and this false doctrine led directly to infant baptism and then sprinkling, neither which are ever found in scripture. Despite the death threats and political pressure of the Roman Catholic Church for people to conform to its doctrine, there always remained a group – even through Medieval times – that baptized as the Bible commanded, “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

When the Reformation hit, some zealously went back to this original formula, but many denominations only changed other things to distinguish them from the Catholic church and were not as consistent in returning to scriptural doctrines of the early apostolic church. Since most denominations today can trace their roots back to these reformists, the common practices today to sprinkle or to immerse “in the titles” is the result of people listening to man-made traditions rather than searching the Bible for themselves. Tradition can be a good thing, but if it contradicts the clear teachings of the Bible, then we should conform to the Biblical standard!

The original disciples of Jesus Christ beginning during His earthly ministry and continuing on throughout the New Testament era, baptized by complete immersion in the name of Jesus Christ. That is the only scriptural example of how to baptize and so we come to a dilemma: do we choose to obey and follow man-made doctrines and practices developed historically by people who in most cases had a very inadequate understanding of scriptures? Or do we go back to what the Bible says and obey it fully and completely? The scripture says:

Ps 118:8 It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.

I'll choose to obey the scriptures and be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ!”

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