

Study 11

WATER BAPTISM

In the practice of: Christian baptism by immersion for believers.

Some Christian traditions categorise Water Baptism as a “Sacrament” or an “Ordinance” along with Holy Communion, and Marriage. For those who regard these as *Sacraments*, they consider that the ceremonies associated with them actually impart a measure of God’s grace to the participants. These branches of Sacramental Christian traditions consider these *sacraments* can only be officiated by a *priest* with *sacramental* authority. Other Christian traditions consider Water Baptism, Holy Communion, and Marriage, as *Ordinances* that *celebrate* and *commemorate* an aspect of God’s Covenant. These traditions do not consider that these ordinances can only be carried out by a ‘priest’ - but rather by any believer who is *authorised*.

Some Sacramentalists believe that Water Baptism actually saves a soul - that is, they believe that Water Baptism *makes a person a Christian*. They therefore refer to Water Baptism as “Christening” (making someone a Christian). Arguably, it is this unBiblical view of Water Baptism that has spiritually stunted Europe where millions of people have this false idea of what makes a person a Christian and consequently live very *unChristian* lives with this false confidence.

1. According to Ephesians 2:8-9, does water baptism make someone a Christian? Discuss.

Water Baptism was an established Jewish ceremony before Christ came and gave it a fuller meaning. This is partly evident by what we read of John the Baptist's ministry prior to the ministry of Jesus. Jews practiced water baptism as a symbol of repentance and cleansing from sin, and initiating into a community.

2. Why did John initially withstand Jesus from being baptised? (Matthew 3:14)

3. What response did Jesus give John the Baptist as to why He had to be baptised? (Matt. 3:15)

He was hot and needed to cool down

He had to give a righteous example to all His followers

He felt this was a great way to launch His ministry since there were so many people watching

A short time after Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist, He organised His disciples to similarly baptise the repentant (John 3:22).

4. How did John the Baptist react to the news that Jesus' Disciples were now also baptising people? (Refer to John 3:26-30)

But Jesus would give the established Jewish practice of water baptism a revolutionary new significance. This significance would not become apparent though until after His death and resurrection.

5. In what way does Matthew 28:18-19 indicate that Christian Water Baptism was to be a 'call to action'? That is, what is the connection between committing your life to Christ and being publicly baptised?

As we have seen, salvation is by God's grace - not the result of anything we can *do*. This is only possible because of what Jesus Christ has done on the Cross. This is why we say that Christianity is not spelt: *D - O*, but *D - O - N - E*. This is why you don't get water baptised to become a Christian, but, *you get water baptised because you've become a Christian*.

6. How does Acts 2:38 support the doctrine of salvation by grace, and the *necessary* ordinance of Water Baptism?

7. How does Acts 2:38 show that Water Baptism *follows* conversion (repentance and faith in Christ)? What does this do to the notion of “infant baptism”?

INFANT BAPTISM?

I was ‘baptised’ as an infant in a Methodist Church. I was later ‘Confirmed’ in the Anglican Church. As I read, then studied, the New Testament I became increasingly convinced that the Biblical pattern for followers of Christ was to be baptised as a believer. As a young man I was baptised as a believer by full immersion because I came to realise that this was what the Bible instructed. Years later when I became more persuaded by Reformed Theology, I explored why most Reformed believers practised infant baptism. I even took two College courses on John Calvin’s *The Institutes of The Christian Religion*. I was very keen to learn about the reasons they would offer for “infant baptism”. John Calvin’s *best* argument or practising infant baptism was this: *If Infant Baptism was not Biblical the New Testament would have said so*. I found this ‘argument’ to be completely unsatisfactory. I then spoke with an Anglican Bishop and asked him for a more fuller explanation. His reasons were-

- It was practiced since the time of the Early Church.
- Circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant for children; Baptism was the sign of the New Covenant and therefore for children (Colossians 2).
- Water baptism is a Covenant Act made on behalf of children by their parents.
- The Book of Acts refers to entire ‘households’ being water baptised and this presumably included babies.

In response to this, those who hold to ‘Believer’s Baptism’ argue that the Early Church did not practice Infant Baptism, but rather it was Believer’s Baptism that they practiced. Secondly, the Old Covenant was primarily a Covenant with an ethnic group (the Hebrews) and this is why infant Hebrew boys were circumcised, whereas the New Covenant is not with an ethnic community, but a faith community entered by faith in Christ - something a baby can not reasonably do. While First Corinthians mentions that the faith of believing parents *sanctifies* their children, it is unreasonable to suggest that this text is referring to Infant Baptism. While the Book of Acts refers to households being baptised, it is mere speculation that this included the involuntary baptism of babies - it is more probable that the baptisms were only for those who volunteered faith in Christ. It is very difficult to say the least to see how a baby could comply with Acts 2:38!

IDENTIFYING WITH CHRIST

8. Read Romans 6:1-5. When the believer goes under the water they are identifying with Christ in His death. How else does Water Baptism identify a believer with Christ?
-

The word *baptise* means to fully submerge. When the ancient Greeks had a ship sink, they would say that it had been *baptised*. Water Baptism identifies a believer with Christ through His death, burial and resurrection, which is why water baptism by mere sprinkling is an insufficient identification.

A PICTURE OF OUR SALVATION

Water Baptism does not save anyone. Neither does a believer *have to be* baptised in order to retain their salvation. Yet our Lord has commanded His followers to be Water Baptised. It is a picture of our salvation since we die to sin (we are buried in the water); we are then raised to new life in Christ (we come up out of the water). All the while the *water* pictures that we have been *washed* of our sins and we are therefore forgiven.

A COVENANT ACT

Relationship with God can only happen with a *covenant*. A covenant is an unbreakable agreement between two parties. Biblically, a Covenant involved witnesses; the slaying of an animal (to signify the penalty for breaking or not keeping the covenant); an exchange of promises; the integration of both party's names; the eating of the roasted slain animal; exchange of weapons; and a physical indication that a covenant had been entered into (such as a cut in the flesh which would leave a Covenant scar - today's covenants generally replace this aspect with a gold ring).

Water Baptism is the covenant ceremony of the New Covenant. In the same way that two people in love could get engaged, their covenant with each other is not established until the covenant ceremony takes place. The wedding of a man to his bride is the covenant ceremony that publicly declares their commitment to each other. A person may give their life to Christ, but their covenant relationship with Christ is not *official* until there is a public display of the covenant with Christ. This is what Water Baptism does.

Amen.