

A PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

by Joel Jupp

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Ephesians 4:4)

Water baptism is important for Christians. Baptism does not save us (Lk. 23:42-43; Rom. 10:9), but we observe baptism because of John's call to repentance (Mk. 1:4), Jesus' example for his followers (Mk. 1:9; Mt. 28:19), the practice of baptism by the early church as reported in Acts, and the theological significance of baptism in Paul's epistles. For these reasons, baptism should be understood and practiced by Christians. Towards this end, this paper will present a balanced, mediating position to support the unity of baptism discussed in Ephesians 4:4.

In many cases, water baptism follows a profession of faith. We see that John's baptism was symbolic of repentance (Mark 1:4) – i.e., rejecting idolatry and embracing God's covenant – and after Christ, this practice continues but in the name of Christ (Acts 2:38). The earliest Christians recognized their need for repentance, that Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel, and that they needed to follow Christ's example. Comparing John's and Jesus' baptisms, Mark 1:8 and Acts 1:5 suggest that baptism in water illustrates our baptism in the Spirit, which is made possible through Christ.

Baptism reminds us for our need for salvation and our connection with Christ. Since all of us will continue to mature, the legitimacy of baptism does not depend on our comprehension. A baptism at age 12 is no less meaningful than a baptism at age 40. In instances when we do not fully understand baptism's significance at the time we are baptized, looking back upon our baptism to remember our union in Christ (as Paul suggests we do) matters more than when the baptism takes place.

In cases where Scripture is silent (e.g., household baptisms in Acts 10 and Acts 16), we can imagine that young children may have been baptized – because of the dramatic nature of first-century conversion and the unlikelihood that family members were left on the sidelines. This, of course, does

not necessitate infant baptism, but it should warn us against dividing our churches over this uncertainty. Even for those who do not practice infant baptism, household baptisms give permission for parents to baptize their younger children (e.g., such as my 3-year-old who believes in Jesus) rather than waiting until an uncertain and unbiblical “age of accountability.”

Because the significance of baptism depends on Christ – not how the baptism was administered – we should avoid mystifying the water and repeating baptisms. Of course, if someone does not know about Jesus Christ, then they can be baptized again as a Christian (Acts 19:1-5). However, if a person is a Christian, there is no need to repeat a different kind of baptism later in life (Acts 18:24-28). There is no need to re-baptize because what matters most is baptism in Christ’s name, not the water.

Baptism is symbolic in the sense that it reminds us of our appeal to God, our union with Christ, our death to sin, our welcome into God’s covenant, and our connection with the body of Christ (Rom. 6:3-5). In short, baptism represents who we are as Christians (Matt. 28:19). Because baptism is symbolic of these realities, it does not impart any saving power in itself, but points to Christ (1 Pet. 3:21). At the same time, baptism is sacramental in the sense that it is designed by God, not man, and for that reason, baptism communicates God’s grace through natural means.

In every case in the New Testament, baptism is practiced in public. This is important for the Church today because of the Western tendency to over-individualize spirituality. Public baptisms edify the local church, as well as ensure that baptized believers are welcomed into their local congregation (Gal. 3:27). We should avoid “lone-ranger” baptisms because baptism publically proclaims our belief in Christ to others.

Due to baptism’s relation to circumcision in Colossians 2:11-13, baptism reminds us of God’s covenant with humanity. While there is a great amount of similarity between God’s covenant activity in the Old and New Testament, we also recognize that Jesus Christ introduces a fulfillment of the covenant (Jer. 31:30-36). For that reason, Jesus Christ introduced some visible changes in the covenant – such as

the cessation of animal sacrifices and the increase of Gentile converts. An important difference between circumcision and baptism is that baptism provides a way for all people to unite in Christ – including women and Gentiles – and is not associated with gender or nationality (1 Cor. 12:13).

Even with all that has been stated thus far, Scripture provides far less details than many of us would like. In the New Testament, we are given few details concerning method or mode, which leaves us to depend on a few threads of data and make some basic conclusions:

- The lack of specificity about baptism (in both the New Testament and early creeds) leads us to believe that the mode/method of baptism is not an essential issue of doctrine that should divide Christians into different categories.
- Early church documents, such as the *Didache*, reveal that there was not one single form of practice within the early church. In fact, the *Didache* suggests that there is some room for Christian liberty on this issue, though we can also state preferences.
- The Greek word for “baptize” suggests immersion, but this is not necessarily the case, and what God has not made clear, it is not for man to mandate; throughout the New Testament, we read that the significance of baptism comes from Jesus Christ, not the physical properties of water.
- Because a specific mode/method is not mandated in the New Testament, we should be guided by 1 Corinthians 8 and 13, respecting the convictions and personal conscience of other believers. We should use these clear didactic passages as guiding principles while we try to interpret the meaning of the baptismal narratives.
- Our preferred method should be based on Scripture, but Christian compassion should allow for exceptions in cases where our preferred method is not necessary – e.g., those who normally immerse should consider sprinkling the disabled or elderly, and those who

normally sprinkle/pour should allow for immersion if preferred by the individual believer.

- If a believer practices baptism at a different time than us, we should not consider that cause for rivalry or division; instead, we should rejoice in our united profession of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord (Eph. 4:4).

Of course, this mediating position will not please everyone. Yet, by considering the early church and prioritizing didactic passages over complex narrative passages (e.g, Acts 18:23-19:5), we can better achieve the unity that is described in Ephesians 4:4. Baptism, after all, was designed to unite the Church, not divide.