

## THE HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM OF BAPTISM

When someone says the word baptism what do you think of? What does it mean to you? If you're a young person who has grown up in the church and you haven't been baptized is it something that you look forward to or is it something that doesn't mean much to you?

Baptism is one of the fundamental of doctrines that are spoken of in **Hebrews 6**. Along with the laying on of hands, it marks the entry point of the christian journey when we receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in **John 3:5** that "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit (i.e. baptized and receive God's spirit) he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Whether we live or die for all eternity depends on whether we take this all important step in our lives.

Recently a very good friend of mine asked me some interesting questions about baptism. She asked me, "Where did baptism come from? Was it something that John the Baptist invented or was it around before John the Baptist?"

In the sermonette today I'd like to look briefly at where baptism came from, what it means and pass on, what I hope will be, some helpful thoughts for our young people here who might be thinking about baptism down the track.

So where did baptism come from? Did John the Baptist invent it or did it pre-date John? In an article entitled "Baptism – Jewish or Pagan?" on the Jews For Jesus website Ceil Rosen writes:

"Baptism is as Jewish as mikveh! The Hebrew word tevilah (translated "immersion") is used in the benediction recited during the mikveh ritual. Certainly no one would dispute that mikveh is a Jewish ceremony. The ritual washings and cleansings commanded in Torah [i.e. the first five books of the Bible which contain the laws of God] and the other writings formed the basis for the rabbinical mikveh laws. Our ancient sages who formulated these rules agreed and emphasized that the purpose of mikveh was spiritual rather than physical cleansing...

"Along with the purposes already mentioned in the Torah, another use of symbolic purification by water became part of early Jewish tradition. This was immersion or baptism for Gentile converts to Judaism. Though the only Biblical requirement for entrance into the covenant was circumcision, baptism became an added requisite. No one knows exactly when or by whom the requirements were changed to include baptism, but it was before the time of Jesus. We know this, because debates on the subject of proselyte baptism are recorded between rabbinic schools of Shammai and Hillel, both contemporaries of Jesus."

The concept of immersion or baptism by water originates with the ceremonial cleansing and washing of the priests when the priesthood was set up in the days of Moses and Aaron which you can read about in **Exodus 29**.

After the Temple was built the Jews built mikveh baths for priests to ceremonially be cleansed of sin before the priests could serve in the Temple. These baths would be about half the size of a home swimming pool, roughly square in size with steps to walk into the water and walk back out again. Ceremonial baptism of converts to Judaism and even Jews called mikveh later became common and so it was a well accepted ritual by the time John the Baptist and Jesus began doing it.

The Apostle Peter likened the Flood to a baptism cleansing the earth of the corruption that had come upon it in Noah's day (**1 Peter 3:20-21**). The Apostle Paul likened the passing of

Israel through the Red to a baptism in **1 Corinthians 10:1-2**. The crossing of the Jordan River also was a type of baptism and entering the Kingdom of God. It's probably no coincidence that John the Baptist did most of his baptizing around the same place east of Jericho that the Israelites crossed the Jordan River on their way into the Promised Land.

On the Day of Pentecost under the inspiration of God Peter gave the conditions by which we can receive God's Holy Spirit. In **Acts 2:38-39** we read: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'".

There are two conditions to receive the Holy Spirit. The first is repentance. Repentance simply means to turn around and go in the opposite direction. To repent means to turn from the direction of sin (the GET way of life) and start obeying God and live by His laws. We may stumble as we strive to walk God's way but repentance means we are trying our best to live by **ALL**, not just some of God's way of life. The second condition is baptism.

What is the proper form of baptism – immersion, sprinkling or pouring? Mr Armstrong writes in his booklet "All About Water Baptism": "The word 'baptize' is not an English word. It is a Greek word. The New Testament was written in the Greek language. In translating it into English, the translators left this Greek word untranslated. Literally, in the Greek, the word is 'baptizo'. The definition of this word is 'IMMERSE.' It means to plunge into, put into, dip. It does not mean 'to sprinkle' or 'to pour'" (p.9).

What does baptism symbolize for a christian? We read the answer to that in **Romans 6:1-4** if you'd like to turn there.

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

Mr Armstrong says the following about these verses: "It pictures, in symbol, the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. But it is a DUAL picture, as all things in God's Plan are DUAL in operation. It also pictures the crucifixion of the old self or of the sinning life, the burial of this sinning self, and the coming up out of this watery grave, symbolic of a CHANGED person resurrected to a new, righteous, spiritual life in Christ Jesus. Going down into the water pictures the DEATH of Christ, and of the old self. Burial in the water pictures the BURIAL of Christ, and of the old self...It is a beautiful [ceremony], full of meaning!" (All About Water Baptism, p.10-11).

Some of you may have wondered what all the fuss was about in the days of the early church when there was a big dispute over whether people, such as Gentile christians, should be circumcised or not. What we need to remember about this dispute is that it was not about whether babies should be circumcised on the eighth day as per the law given in **Leviticus 12:2-3**. The dispute was about the law given in **Exodus 12:43-49** which says that no uncircumcised person could keep the Passover.

This ritual of circumcision was merely an outward sign of one's commitment to God and this outward ritual was replaced with the ritual of baptism as the outward sign of one's commitment to God. We read of this in **Colossians 2:11-12**: "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism."

Some of you young people here may have heard the idea of the Holy Spirit working with you even though it is not in you. Where does this idea come from? Well, we find that in **John 14:17** if you like to turn there. We read: "The Spirit of truth, [which] the world cannot receive, because it neither sees [it] nor knows [it]; but you know [it], for [it] dwells with you and will be in you." The apostles had the Holy Spirit working with them but it wasn't in them until after Christ was resurrected.

Those of you here who haven't been baptized but have an enthusiasm for God's way and learning the amazing truths in the Bible may not have God's spirit in you but it is with you and helping you to understand and desire more.

So when should you be baptized? A degree of maturity is required for baptism because, just like marriage, baptism is a commitment to God's way of life for the rest of your life. Mr Armstrong has these words to say about repentance. He writes:

"An immature mind may experience an emotional feeling of temporary remorse, and this may be falsely construed as REPENTANCE when it is only momentary, soon forgotten. It is like 'puppy-love'. How many teenagers, 13 to 17, have a number of temporary emotional experiences of feeling sure they are 'in love'. Of course they themselves feel sure of it, and cannot be talked out of it. Usually they grow out of it, but in rare cases, of course, they may really 'know their minds' -- though this is the rare exception, not the rule. So with repentance and belief" (All About Water Baptism, p.15).

There are two things you must not get hung up on if you are thinking about getting baptized. The first is thinking you have to be near perfect. Yes, you should have some fruits that prove that you are serious about committing to God's way but you don't have to be near perfect. You need the power of God to overcome sin and that's why need to be baptized to gain that power from God. Baptism is the beginning of the life of overcoming not the end of it.

The second thing is waiting to feel some dramatic that will let you know you are ready. Attitudes of the heart and the Holy Spirit are spiritual and not something that you can feel so don't get hung up on waiting for a dramatic calling accompanied by great feelings.

If God's way of life and the teachings of the truth are something that you are committed to, no matter what, then you do have the repentance required for baptism no matter how you feel. Of course, counselling with a minister will help you determine just how genuine that sense of commitment really is. If you've got to the point where turning your back on your calling is definitely not an option then it's a good time to consider baptism.

I remember when I was living in Sydney many years ago a beautiful girl named Lara who was the sister of my flatmate at the time. She was really bubbly redhead with beautiful blue eyes and a real love of life. When I was down there she got involved with a guy outside of the church. Now this was in the days when such a thing would mean being suspended from church. Some time later she repented and started counselling to be baptized. Before she had the chance to be baptized on a dark night she was out driving when suddenly she was hit by another vehicle and she was killed in terrible car crash.

Why did God let it happen when she was so close to being baptized? I don't know why but what I do know is that her story is a very good reminder of how our life could be snuffed out at any time. Even if you are 19 or 20 and in the prime of our youth none of us have any guarantee of living out the rest of this year or even the rest of this month. Knowing that we should ask, "Where do I stand with God at this moment?"

In a sermon many years ago about peer pressure Bob Morton made some comments along these lines. He said:

“We do have a group of young adult singles in their 20's who have grown up in the church. They are no longer teenagers. They can be baptized if they want to. Peer pressure is not much of a problem for them anymore because they've grown out of that stage but they're complacent in doing what they know they should. They make all sorts of excuses like, 'I want to escape the great tribulation but I don't want to do all the things a baptized member has to do like praying and studying and fasting. That would be too much for me.' Well, you see God says if we're complacent about what He is offering us we could lose what He is offering us all together.”

When going for baptism a minister will counsel you about counting the cost which you can read about at the end of **Luke 14**. What is it going to cost you? Are you willing to pay the price of that committed lifestyle or will you later turn around and say it's too much for me?

That's good to reflect upon. What is also good to reflect upon is what it will cost you if you don't do it? What would you miss out on if the same thing happened to you that happened to Lara in the story I told before?

Only when baptized are you truly forgiven your sins as opposed to forgiven to continue in a relationship with God. Only when you receive God's spirit at baptism are you officially eligible for the first resurrection by having God's spirit in you and not just working with you. Only when baptized do you qualify for the better resurrection? Whether we live or die for all eternity depends on whether we take this all important step in our lives.

It's good to count the cost. What is even better is to count the reward. Jesus spoke about the pearl of great price in one of His parables.

You young people here today, what would it be like to be God and have His powers? What will it be like to help Jesus Christ with the awesome job of fixing this world up and creating the wonderful world tomorrow here on earth. This is what God is offering you if you are prepared to commit to Him and His way of life for the rest of your life!

This future is AWESOME! It's mind-blowing! The reward is SO incredible that any sacrifices you have to make are NOTHING in comparison! We should pray that our young people and our prospective members who are not attending yet will comprehend just how incredible the reward is so they will have the motivation to commit further to God and to His church.

All these wonderful these things are why overcoming, repentance as well as baptism are all important – they are our passport to the World Tomorrow and being a part of that better resurrection!

For those of you thinking about baptism come join the winning team when you feel you are ready and those of who have been baptized let's stay on course and be there when Jesus Christ returns.