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BAPTISM

By baptism we confess our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and testify of our death to sin and of our purpose to walk in newness of life. Thus we acknowledge Christ as Lord and Saviour, become His people, and are received as members by His church. Baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit. It is by immersion in water and is contingent on an affirmation of faith in Jesus and evidence of repentance of sin. It follows instruction in the Holy Scriptures and acceptance of their teachings.

Nyangwira, who lived in Central Africa, did not consider baptism to be merely an option. For more than a year she had eagerly studied the Bible. She longed to become a Christian.

One evening she shared with her husband the things she had learned. Outraged, he shouted, "I don't want this kind of religion in my home and if you keep on studying I'll kill you." Although she was crushed, Nyangwira continued studying, and soon was ready for baptism.

Before leaving for the baptismal service Nyangwira knelt respectfully before her husband and told him she was to be baptized. He picked up his large hunting knife and shouted, "I have told you that I do not want you to be baptized. The day you are baptized I will kill you."

But Nyangwira, determined to follow her Lord, left with her husband's threats resounding in her ears.

Before entering the water, she confessed her sins and dedicated her life to her Saviour, not knowing whether she would be laying down her life for her Lord that day, too. Peace filled her heart as she was baptized.

When she returned home, she brought the knife to her husband.

"Have you been baptized?" he asked angrily.

"Yes," replied Nyangwira simply. "Here is the knife."

"Are you ready to be killed?"

"Yes, I am."

Amazed at her courage, the husband no longer had a desire to kill her.

How Important Is Baptism?

Is baptism worth risking one's life for? Does God really require baptism? Does salvation hinge on whether one is baptized?

Jesus' Example

One day Jesus left the carpenter shop in Nazareth, bade His family farewell, and went to the Jordan where His cousin John was preaching. Approaching John, He asked to be baptized. Amazed, John tried to dissuade Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"

"Permit it to be so now," Jesus answered, "for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:13-15).

Jesus' baptism forever gave this ordinance divine sanction (Matt. 3:13-17; cf. Matt. 21:25). Baptism is an aspect of righteousness in which all can participate. Since Christ, the Sinless One, was baptized to "fulfill all righteousness," we, who are sinners, ought to do the same.

Jesus' Commandment

At the end of His ministry Christ commanded His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-20).

In this commission Christ made it clear that He required baptism of those who wished to become a part of His church, His spiritual kingdom. As, through the disciples' ministry, the Holy Spirit brought people to repent and to accept Jesus as their Saviour they were to be baptized in the name of the triune God. Their baptism would demonstrate that they had entered into a personal relationship with Christ and were committed to living in harmony with the principles of His kingdom of grace. Christ concluded His mandate to baptize with the assurance, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

After Christ's ascension the apostles proclaimed the necessity and urgency of baptism (Acts 2:38; 10:48; 22:16). In response, multitudes were baptized, forming the New Testament church (Acts 2:41,47; 8:12) and accepting the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism and Salvation

Christ taught that "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). In the apostolic church baptism automatically followed acceptance of Christ. It was a confirmation of the new believer's faith (cf. Acts 8:12; 16:30-34).

Peter used the experience of Noah during the Flood to illustrate the relationship between baptism and salvation. In antediluvian times sin had reached such proportions that, through Noah, God warned the world to repent or face destruction. Only eight persons believed, entered the ark, and "were saved through water." "There is also an antitype which now saves us," Peter said, "namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the

flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:20,21).

Peter explained that we are saved by baptism as Noah and his family were saved through water. Of course God, not the flood waters, saved Noah. By analogy, it is the blood of Christ, not the water of baptism, that removes sin from the believer. "But baptism, like [Noah's] obedience in entering the ark, is 'the answer of a good conscience toward God.' When man by God's power gives 'the answer,' salvation provided 'by the resurrection of Jesus Christ' becomes effective."

However, while baptism is vitally linked to salvation, it does not guarantee salvation. Paul considered Israel's exodus experience to be a symbolic representation of baptism: "I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink." "Immersed" in water—the cloud above and the water on each side—the people of Israel were symbolically baptized as they passed through the Red Sea. Yet in spite of this experience "God was not well pleased" with most of them (1 Cor. 10:1-5). So today, baptism does not automatically assure salvation. Israel's experience was written for our "admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:11,12).

"One Baptism"

The administration of baptism in the Christian world varies. Some employ immersion, or dipping; others aspersion, or sprinkling; and still others affusion, or pouring. Characteristic of the unity the Spirit brings in God's church is the practice of "one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). What does the Bible reveal about the meaning of the term to baptize, about the practice itself, and its spiritual significance?

The Meaning of the Word "Baptize."

The English word baptize comes from the Greek verb baptizo, which implies immersion, since it is derived from the verb bapto, meaning "to dip in or under." When the verb to baptize refers to water baptism it carries the idea of immersing, or dipping a person under water.

In the New Testament the verb to baptize is used (1) to refer to water baptism (e.g. Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:9; Acts 2:41); (2) as a metaphor of Christ's suffering and death (Matt. 20:22,23; Mark 10:38,39; Luke 12:50); (3) to the coming of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16); and (4) of ablutions or the ritual washing of the hands (Mark 7:3,4; Luke 11:38). This fourth usage simply denotes washings to cleanse from ceremonial impurities, and does not legitimize baptism by pouring. Scripture uses the noun baptism of both water baptism and Christ's death (Matt. 3:7; 20:22).

J.K. Howard observes that the New Testament offers "no evidence that sprinkling was ever an apostolic practice, indeed the evidence all points to it being a late introduction."

Baptism in the New Testament

The incidents of water baptism the New Testament records involved immersion. We read that John baptized in the river Jordan (Matt. 3:6; cf. Mark 1:5) and "in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there" (John 3:23). Only immersion would require "much water."

John immersed Jesus. He baptized Jesus "in the Jordan" and after the baptism Jesus "came up out of the water" (Mark 1:9,10, RSV; cf. Matt. 3:16).

The apostolic church baptized by immersion also. When Philip the evangelist baptized the Ethiopian eunuch they both "went down into the water" and "came up out of the water" (Acts 8:38,39).

Baptism in History

Before the Christian era the Jews baptized their proselytes by immersion. The Essenes at Qumran followed the practice of immersing both members and converts.

Evidence from the paintings in catacombs and churches, from the mosaics on floors, walls, and ceilings, from sculptured reliefs, and from drawings in ancient New Testaments "overwhelmingly testifies to immersion as the normal mode of baptism in the Christian church during the first ten to fourteen centuries." Baptisteries in the ancient cathedrals, churches, and ruins in North Africa, Turkey, Italy, France, and elsewhere still testify to the antiquity of this practice.

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism's meaning is intimately related to its mode. Alfred Plummer said, "It is only when baptism is administered by immersion that its full significance is seen."

Symbol of Christ's Death and Resurrection

As covering by waters symbolized overwhelming trouble and afflictions (Ps. 42:7; 69:2; 124:4,5), so Jesus' water baptism represented a prophetic enactment of His suffering, death, and burial (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50) and His emergence from the water spoke of His subsequent resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5).

Baptism would have had no significance as a symbol of Christ's passion "if the apostolic church had practiced a mode of baptism other than immersion." Therefore "the strongest argument for baptism by immersion is a theological one."

Symbol of Being Dead to Sin and Alive to God

In baptism believers enter into the passion experience of our Lord. Paul said, "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...we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3,4).

The intimacy of the believer's relationship with Christ is revealed through expressions like "baptized into Christ Jesus," "baptized into His death," and "buried with Him through

baptism." Howard noted, "In the symbolic act of baptism the believers enters into the death of Christ, and in a real sense that death becomes his death; and he enters into the resurrection of Christ, and that resurrection becomes his resurrection."

What does the believers' entering into the passion of our Lord imply?

1. Death to sin.

In baptism believers "have been united together in the likeness of His [Christ's] death" (Rom. 6:5) and "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). This means "our old man was crucified with Him, that the old body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin (Rom. 6:6-8).

Believers have renounced their former lifestyle. They are dead to sin and confirm that the "old things have passed away" (2 Cor. 5:17), their lives being hid with Christ in God. Baptism symbolizes the crucifixion of the old life. It is not only a death but also a burial. We are "buried with Him in baptism" (Col. 2:12). As a burial follows a person's death, so when the believer goes down into the watery grave the old life that passed away when he accepted Jesus Christ is buried.

In baptism believers renounced the world. In obedience to the command "'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean'" (2 Cor. 6:17), candidates make public their forsaking of Satan's service and their receiving of Christ into the life.

In the apostolic church the call to repentance included the call to baptism (Acts 2:38). Thus baptism also marks true repentance. Believers die to their transgressing of the law and obtain forgiveness of sin through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. The baptismal ceremony is a demonstration of an inner cleansing—the washing away of sins that have been confessed.

2. Alive to God.

Christ's resurrection power goes to work in our lives. It enables us to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4)--dead now to sin, "but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:11). We testify that the only hope of a life victorious over the old nature is in the grace of a risen Lord who has provided a new spiritual life through the energizing power of the Holy Spirit. This new life lifts us to a higher plateau of human experience, giving us new values, aspirations, and desires that focus on a commitment to Jesus Christ. We are new disciples of our Saviour, and baptism is the sign of our discipleship.

Symbol of a Covenant Relationship

In Old Testament times circumcision marked the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:1-7).

The Abrahamic covenant had both spiritual and national aspects. Circumcision was a mark of national identity. Abraham himself and all the males of his family eight days old and older were to be circumcised (Gen. 17:10-14; 25-27). Any male not circumcised was to be "'cut off" from God's people because he had broken the covenant (Gen. 17:14).

That the covenant was made between God and Abraham, an adult, reveals its spiritual dimension. Abraham's circumcision signified and confirmed his previous experience of justification by faith. His circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11).

But circumcision alone did not guarantee entrance into the true spiritual dimension of the covenant. Frequently God's spokesmen warned that nothing less than spiritual circumcision would suffice. "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" (Deut. 10:16; cf. 30:6; Jer. 4:4). The "uncircumcised in the heart" were to be punished with the Gentiles (Jer. 9:25,26).

When the Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah they broke their covenant relationship with God, terminating their special status as His chosen people (Dan. 9:24-27; see chapter 4 of this book). Although God's covenant and His promises remained the same, He chose a new people. Spiritual Israel replaced the Jewish nation (Gal. 3:27-29; 6:15,16).

Christ's death ratified the new covenant. People entered this covenant through spiritual circumcision—a response of faith to Jesus' atoning death. Christians have "the gospel for the uncircumcised" (Gal. 2:7). The new covenant requires an "inward faith" and not an "outward rite" of those who would belong to spiritual Israel. One can be a Jew through birth; but one can be a Christian only through the new birth. "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avail anything, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). What matters is "circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit" (Rom. 2:28,29).

Baptism, the sign of a saving relationship with Jesus, represents this spiritual circumcision. "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, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead" (Col. 2:11,12).

"Having the 'body of flesh' removed through the spiritual circumcision performed by Jesus, the one baptized now 'puts on Christ' and enters into the covenant relationship with Jesus. As a result he is in line to receive the fulfillment of the covenant promises." "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ....If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:27-29, RSV). Those who have entered into this covenant relationship experience God's assurance, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33).

Symbol of Consecration to Christ's Service

At His baptism Jesus received a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, signifying His anointing or dedication to the mission His Father had assigned Him (Matt. 3:13-17; Acts 10:38). His experience reveals that water baptism and Spirit baptism belong together, that a baptism void of the reception of the Holy Spirit is incomplete.

In the apostolic church the outpouring of the Holy Spirit generally followed water baptism. So today, when we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we are dedicated, consecrated, and united with the three great powers of heaven and to the spreading of the everlasting gospel.

The Holy Spirit prepares us for this ministry by purifying our hearts from sin. John declared that Jesus "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11). Isaiah revealed that God would cleanse His people from their impurities "by the spirit of judgment and by the spirit of burning" (Isa. 4:4). I will "thoroughly purge away your dross," God said, "and take away all your alloy" (Isa. 1:25). "God is a consuming fire" to sin (Heb. 12:29). The Holy Spirit will purify the lives of all who surrender to Him, consuming their sins.

Then the Holy Spirit provides them with His gifts. His gifts are "a special divine endowment, given at the time of baptism, to enable the believer to serve the church and to minister to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ." The baptism of the Holy Spirit gave the early church the power to witness (Acts 1:5,8), and only that same baptism will enable the church to complete its mission of proclaiming the everlasting gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 24:14; Rev. 14:6).

Symbol of Entrance In to the Church

As a sign of a person's regeneration or new birth (John 3:3,5), baptism also marks that person's entrance into Christ's spiritual kingdom. Since it unites the new believer to Christ, it always functions as the door to the church. Through baptism the Lord adds the new disciples to the body of believers—His body, the church (Acts 2:41,47; 1 Cor. 12:13). Then they are members of God's family. One cannot be baptized without joining the church family.

Qualifications for Baptism

Scripture compares the relationship between Christ and His church to a marriage. In marriage, both parties should know well the responsibilities and commitments involved. Those desiring baptism must reveal in their lives faith, repentance, and the fruits of repentance, as well as an understanding of the meaning of baptism and the subsequent spiritual relationship.

Faith

One prerequisite for baptism is a faith in Jesus' atoning sacrifice as the only means of salvation from sin. Christ said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). In the apostolic church only those who believed the gospel were baptized (Acts 8:12,36,37; 18:8).

Since "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17), instruction is an essential part of baptismal preparation. Christ's great commission confirms the importance of such instruction: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19,20). Becoming a disciple involves thorough instruction.

Repentance

"Repent," said Peter, "and let every one of you be baptized" (Acts 2:38). Instruction in the Word of God produces not only faith but repentance and conversion. In response to God's call people see their lost condition, confess their sinfulness, submit themselves to

God, repent of their sin, accept Christ's atonement, and consecrate themselves to a new life with Him. Without conversion they cannot enter a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only through repentance can they experience death to sin—a prerequisite for baptism.

Fruits of Repentance

Those who desire baptism must profess faith and experience repentance. But unless they also bring forth "fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8) they will not have met the Biblical requirements for baptism. Their lives ought to demonstrate their commitment to the truth as it is in Jesus and express their love to God through obedience to His commandments. In preparing for baptism they ought to have surrendered erroneous beliefs and practices. The fruits of the Spirit displayed in their lives will reveal that the Lord abides in them and they in Him (John 15:1-8). Unless they give this evidence of their relationship with Christ, they are not yet ready to join the church.

Examination of Candidates

Becoming a church member involves taking a spiritual step; it is not simply a matter of having one's name recorded in a book. Those administering baptism are responsible for determining the readiness of candidates for baptism. They must ascertain the candidate's understanding of the principles for which the church stands and give evidence of a new creation and an enjoyable experience in the Lord Jesus.

Yet they must be careful not to judge the motives of those seeking baptism. "When a person presents himself as a candidate for church membership, we are to examine the fruit of his life, and leave the responsibility of his motive with himself."

Some have been buried alive in the water of baptism. Self did not die. These did not receive a new life in Christ. Those who have joined the church in this way have brought with them the seeds of weakness and apostasy. Their "unsanctified" influence confuses those within and without the church and jeopardizes its witness.

Should Infants and Children Be Baptized?

Baptism incorporates new believers into the church within the context of "being born again." Their conversion has qualified them for baptism and church membership. Incorporation takes place at the "new birth," not at "infant birth." This is why believers were baptized—"both men and women" (Acts 8:12,13, 29-38; 9:17,18; 1 Cor. 1:14). "Nowhere in the New Testament," Karl Barth admitted, "is infant baptism either permitted or commanded." G.R. Beasley-Murray confessed, "I find myself unable to recognize in infant baptism the baptism of the New Testament Church."

Because infants and little children cannot experience conversion, they do not qualify for baptism. Does that mean they are excluded from the new covenant community? Certainly not! Jesus did not exclude them from His kingdom of grace. "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them," He said, "for of such is the kingdom of heaven." And He laid His hands on them" (Matt. 19:14,15). Believing parents fulfill a vital role in guiding their children into a relationship with Christ that will eventually lead them to baptism.

Jesus' positive response to the mothers who brought their children to Him to be blessed has led to the practice of child dedication. For this service parents bring their children to church to be presented or dedicated to God.

At what age should a person be ready for baptism? Individuals can be baptized if they **(1)** are old enough to understand the meaning of baptism, **(2)** have surrendered to Christ and are converted, **(3)** understand the fundamental principles of Christianity, and **(4)** comprehend the significance of church membership. A person puts his salvation in jeopardy only when he has come to the age of accountability and then rejects the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Because individuals differ as to their spiritual maturity at any given age, some are ready for baptism at an earlier age than are others. So we can set no fixed minimum age for baptism. When parents consent to their children's being baptized at an early age, they must accept the responsibility for their spiritual growth and character development.

The Fruit of Baptism

The pre-eminent fruit baptism bears is a life lived for Christ. Goals and aspirations focus on Christ, not on self. "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth" (Col. 3:1,2). Baptism is not the reaching of the highest peak attainable to the Christian. As we grow spiritually, we acquire Christian graces to be used in serving others on God's plan of multiplication: "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord" (2 Peter 1:2). As we remain faithfully committed to our baptismal vows, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose name we have been baptized, guarantee that we have access to divine power to assist in every emergency we may face in the post-baptismal life.

The second fruit is a life lived for Christ's church. We are no longer isolated individuals; we have become members of Christ's church. As living stones we make up God's temple (1 Peter 2:2-5). We maintain a special relationship to Christ, the head of the church, from whom we receive our daily graces for growth and development in love (Eph. 4:16). We assume responsibilities within the covenant community, the members of which, bear a responsibility for the newly baptized (1 Cor. 12:12-26). For their own good, as well as that of the church, these new members must be involved in a life of worship, prayer, and loving service (Eph. 4:12).

The final fruit is a life lived in and for the world. It is true that we who have been baptized hold our citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20). But we have been called out of the world simply to be trained within the body of Christ to return to the world as servants, participating in Christ's saving ministry. True disciples will not withdraw from the world into the church; we are born into Christ's kingdom as missionaries. Faithfulness to our baptismal covenant involves leading others into the kingdom of grace.

Today God anxiously waits for us to enter into the abundant life He so graciously has provided. "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).