

Water Baptism

by Mark Mitchell

What it Means

Jesus gave two symbolic rites to His Church to follow: the Lord's Supper and water baptism. These were commanded to be carried out in order to be reminded of certain realities of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Both of these are outward symbols of inward realities. The Lord's Supper is taken to focus us upon the price that was paid for our salvation. In order for us to be free from sin's penalty and grip, Jesus' body was broken and His blood was shed. Water baptism has the function of focusing our attention on our introduction to faith in Jesus Christ. It helps us to understand and grasp what happened when we received Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Romans 6:4 speaks of this reality: "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." Water baptism pictures for us this inner reality - that through our trust in Jesus Christ, we have been cut off from the old life we once lived and have been introduced into a whole new realm of living, so that we enter into a new life. When we accepted Jesus' death on the cross for us personally, we were "placed into" what He did on the cross. In Him, we died and were buried. In Him, we also were raised into a whole new life. This is what water baptism represents. It is a public statement to everyone that we have actually taken the step of renouncing our old life of self-centeredness. In response to the invitation of the Lord Jesus, joining ourselves to Him, we state that we have begun to follow Him in the fullness of strength which He provides.

It is important to remember that water baptism is an outward symbol of something that has already happened in the heart. Water baptism does not save us, nor does it even change our standing with God. As a public statement, it is an important acknowledgment of what God has already done with our hearts. Since the Lord commanded that we be baptized (Matthew 28:18-20), and it focuses us on this whole new basis for living we have stepped into, we symbolize that publicly.

Some Important Questions

Who should be baptized? Scripture teaches that everyone who has received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior should be baptized in water. It doesn't matter how old we are or how

long we have known the Lord. If we know Jesus and have given our life to Him, then it is right that we publicly acknowledge through this display our new life with Christ and the saving relationship we have now entered.

What about immersion vs. sprinkling? Don't different churches baptize in different ways? Sadly, the debate over which symbol to use in baptism has historically been very painful and destructive in the church. Since baptism is just a symbol of an inward reality, the issue isn't how that reality is symbolized, but the fact that it takes place. Scripture doesn't give us enough information to know exactly how baptism was done in the New Testament. It could have been either immersion or sprinkling. The point isn't how it was done, but that we obey the Lord's command to baptize. We follow the practice of immersion (or dunking!) because it seems to picture so well the reality of what happens when we received Jesus as Lord and Savior. We walk into the water carrying all the baggage and sin of our life before we met the Lord. Then we go under the water (in itself a symbol of cleansing), just as the Lord died and went into the earth. And then we are raised with the Lord and come out of the water symbolically as new creatures, perfectly forgiven and cleansed by our dying with Jesus. So now we live life on a whole new basis, with no sin standing between us and God, able to walk ahead by His power and with His forgiveness into life as He meant for us to experience it. So we follow the practice of immersion but we recognize that each individual and group are free to choose for themselves what symbol best pictures the reality of dying and raising with Jesus.

How do I know if I am ready? How can I prepare for baptism? According to how baptism was done in the New Testament, we are ready as soon as we have committed our life to Jesus Christ and received Him as Lord and Savior. In fact, in the New Testament, as soon as someone confessed Jesus, they usually were immediately taken to the nearest water and baptized. So if you have received Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you understand that what water baptism symbolizes is true in your heart, then you are ready to be baptized.

What if I was baptized as a baby? Do I need to be baptized again? This is a personal choice. Baptism in the New Testament was believer's baptism, so it seems that baptism is

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done when one has personally chosen to give his life to Jesus Christ. If we were baptized when we were so young that we could not possibly understand and enter into the choice to give our life to Jesus, then it makes sense that water baptism would be a fitting thing to do now that we have made that choice.

What about children? Is there an age at which children can or should be baptized? Since water baptism symbolizes one's

decision to become a Christian and receive Jesus' death for him, baptism should never take place before a child can truly understand and freely choose to enter into that reality. It is true that children can receive Jesus at a very young age; but baptism can only be meaningful to the degree that a child can understand it. This is a decision we leave to parents but we encourage slowness and caution because as a child's understanding increases, so does the significance and impact of the act.