

# Baptism : its meaning and functions

Religion



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Baptism By Reshma Soodeen Caribbean Nazarene College In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Course: DT 200 Survey of Theology Lecturer: Mrs. Donnamie Ali Date: April 15, 2013 Introduction Baptism seems to be one of the most controversial points of doctrine and therefore, there are many traditions and teachings regarding the subject. According to Purkiser (1978), the concept of Baptism varies greatly in theological significance as well as mode. In terms of beliefs, the continuum extends from infant baptism to adult believer's baptism.

Some groups argue that full immersion into the water is necessary during baptism, while others argue that it is not. The idea and significance of Baptism varies tremendously in the different branches of the Christian churches. Baptism is mentioned several times in the bible. In Matthews 3: 2-12, John preached to the Jews, that they should repent for their sins in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom. He spoke about Baptism with water as well as baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. The belief is that Baptism accomplishes the washing away of sin.

Acts 2: 38, "...Then Peter said unto them, Repent , and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost..." The Bible also states that, on judgement day, Jesus will judge all who has lived, and separate the saved from the unsaved. The saved will go to eternal life in the Kingdom, while the unsaved will be cursed with eternal punishment. (Matt. 25: 31-46). With this in mind, one can see the importance of finding the answer to the question, What can I do to be saved? Romans 3. 23 states that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

This means then that everyone is in need of salvation. According to Acts 4. 12, salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone. To be saved one must hear the good news of Jesus Christ (Romans 10: 14), Believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God (Hebrews 11: 6; Acts 8: 37; Mark 16: 16; John 8: 24), Repent of our sins (Luke 13: 3), Confess faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10: 9), be Baptised (Acts 2: 37-41; Peter 3: 21; John 3: 3-5; Acts 22: 16; Romans 6: 3-8; Colossians 2: 12; Galatians 3: 26-27; Mark 16: 15-16 and Ephesians 4: 5), remain faithful and carry one's cross daily (Rev 2: 10; Matt 24: 13; Luke 9: 23).

In the most basic terms, baptism can be thought of as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. It is a symbol which points to the idea of a greater reality. When the church performs baptism, it testifies to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and signifies the sinner's union with Jesus in all that he did and accomplished on behalf of mankind. Baptism along with the Lord's supper or communion, is also a seal. In baptism the Lord places his mark upon the baptized. The repentant and professing Christian receives the seal of heaven's ownership. Powell 2008). This paper will look at Baptism with water as well as, its meaning and its functions. What is Baptism? Baptism is the outward sign of accepting Jesus Christ. Although baptism by itself does not save, baptism and salvation goes together. Baptism is something that one does after they have accepted Christ into their lives. There are many questions surrounding the concept of baptism, two of which are: should infants be baptized and should it be full immersion or is sprinkling sufficient? These questions go back to about 400 AD, to a man named Augustine.

Augustine came up with the idea of “ original sin”, which means that at birth, everyone inherits the sins of Adam, and is therefore separated from God from the beginning of their lives. Parents were obviously and understandably concerned about this, and decided to baptise their children in the event of them dying before accepting Jesus Christ as their saviour. Since full immersion of infants would have been risky, they decided to sprinkle the children with water. Matthew 18: 10 indicated that children are kept safe by God until they can fully understand the importance of accepting Christ.

Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 18: 10) (Swindoll n. d) Baptism symbolises Jesus’s Death Burial and Resurrection. According to Rice (2000), when the word Baptism is used in the Bible, unless otherwise stated, it refers to Baptism by water and that the word baptize comes from the Greek word “ Baptizo”, which means to dip, plunge or completely immerse in liquid.

The word “ Baptizo” was also associated with the art of dyeing. Just as in the process of dyeing, the material is completely dipped into the dye liquid and when lifted it revealed a new look, so too in baptism the believer is completely immersed in water. Immersion during Baptism symbolises the death of one’s sins, and the becoming of a new creature, being born again into the household of God and his son Jesus Christ. After immersion one is raised again from sin, to a new life through baptism.

Baptism symbolises the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Romans 6: 4 states that “ Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the  
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Father, even so we should also walk in newness of life. " (Copeland n. d) Baptism symbolises the cleansing of one's soul. Baptism symbolises the washing and cleansing of one's soul. Ananias, when he was sent to Paul in Damascus, said to him: "... arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins..." (Acts 22: 16).

Peter said to the multitude in Jerusalem "... Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins ... " (Acts 2: 38). Paul, writing to the Corinthians and reminding them of their position in Christ, said "... but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus ... " And to the Ephesians he refers directly to the medium of this cleansing when he says: " That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. : 26). (Hoeck 1998). It is the Lord's promise that the same way that water washes away dirt, the blood that was shed by Jesus Christ, washes away sins of those who accept him. ( Albani n. d) Baptism is an act of obedience Baptism is an act of obedience, which should be an immediate part of one's acceptance of the gift of grace offered by Jesus Christ. Matthew 28: 19 says, " Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus Christ himself took water baptism by immersing in River Jordan in order to fulfil all righteousness. (John 3: 3). The Word of God asks believers to follow Jesus's steps of humble obedience, which includes water baptism. John the Baptist called the Jews to confess their sins and demonstrate repentance through immersion in the Jordan River. Jesus, who is without sin, joined the crowd at the river and asked John to baptize him.

By following his example in the waters of baptism, believers are publicly confessing their faith in the Saviour and identifying themselves with Him. In a conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus declared, " I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and spirit" 1 Peter 2: 21, ... " because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:" Baptism is an act of obedience to God after salvation. (DeMichele n. d) Baptism unites believers with Christ

Baptism represents the sinner's spiritual union with Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection. Romans 6. 1-5, "...What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection..." Those who are united with Christ died when Christ died, were buried when Christ was buried and just as Christ rose, they too rise out of the water to a life of righteousness. Of course the dying, burying and rising are all symbolically represented in the act of baptism. Because of their unity with Christ by faith, they receive the benefits of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

Believers, through faith, participate in all that Jesus did and therefore, baptism can be seen as a picture of that spiritual reality. Baptism is the sacrament that unites believers with Jesus Christ and makes them members

of God's family. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, baptism initiates believers into the Church, bestows the promise of God's grace upon them, assures that God will forgive their sins and calls them to a life of Christian service and fulfilment. Through baptism believers become adopted sons and daughters of the God.

At the very moment of adoption, the children of God receive their inheritance which is eternal union with God. (Brito, 2008) Baptism provides an eschatological confidence that the life in Christ is a never ending life. " Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. " (Romans 6: 8-10). These verses reveal an important link between the doctrine of baptism and the doctrine of eschatology.

Because one is united with Christ, in his death and his resurrection, through Baptism, the believer has confidence of a future resurrection. Baptism makes the believer an adopted child of God, a sharer in God's nature, a co-heir with Christ, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is said to be the seal of eternal life. This seal is for " the day of redemption", when Christians who is faithful to the seal, will die " narked for eternal life", with the hope of seeing God. The eternal life that is spoken about here is a life that is meant to be enjoyed in the Kingdom of God.

John 3: 16 states, " For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. " This clearly states that the condition for having eternal life

is believing and identifying with God. Baptism into death followed by a figurative resurrection to “newness of life” constitutes the way of salvation. Romans 1: 16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek”, clearly states that salvation is reserved for those who truly worship. Powell (2008) Baptism has a corporate significance According to Powell (2008), baptism has a corporate significance. Baptism along with the Lord’s Supper (communion), establishes the church as the body of Christ. This means that the entire church is the body of Christ and lives in union with God. The focus here is not the number of members in the church, or their great diversities, but that together they make up the body of Christ. “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. (1 Corinthians 12: 12). Water baptism as well as acceptance into church membership, are practices taught and commanded in the scriptures. The function of baptism however, is to recognise and not to effect actual membership in Christ. Kay (2003), states that since the early years of Christianity baptism has been considered the rite of initiation into the Christian community. In the body of Christ, all members share in a common dignity, and therefore, there is no inequality resulting from race, nationality, social status or sex.

The Apostle Paul states, “...There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling...” Likewise 1 Corinthians states, “...For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into[a] one Spirit...” In Baptism believers change masters, and separate themselves from the



world of sin. Baptism represents a change of masters. Man passes from one master to another. Everyone must have a master and by divine grace, some have already chosen their master by accepting Jesus Christ as their saviour.

Those who now believe in Jesus Christ and are now free from sin, was once living in sin and were slaves of sin. In Romans 6, Paul described sin as a cruel, master that enslaves humans and uses them as tools of wickedness. Although Christ's death has made it possible for one to be freed from sin, it does not mean that one is free to follow his or her own path. What it means is that one has had a change of masters, and should live in a way that will be pleasing to Christ. Believers would have experienced a change of ownership, and as a result they now belong to a loving, holy and righteous God.

They now strive towards the goal of obedience to God which will result in eternal life. Paul wrote, " Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart the pattern of teaching which was delivered to you, and having been made free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness. " (Romans 6: 17-18) (Newton 1998) Paul indicated that there were two elements involved in liberation from the control of sin. Firstly one must obey from the heart, and therefore forcing someone to " ritualistically obey" has no value.

Paul stated that one dies to sin and is liberated from its control when one is buried with Christ and is motivated to obey God; baptism is the moment when their ownership changes. " Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. "(Romans 6: 6-7). This doctrine of sanctification, developed by Paul, is normal and expected of

believers as a result of their union with Christ, through Baptism. The former self is dead by virtue of immersion into Christ and therefore the believer is no longer a slave of sin.

Baptism signals and signifies a new master, Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 5: 17 states , “ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have become new. Therefore having died to sin in baptism, the new man in Christ is now freed from sin. ” Baptism is a covering in Christ Nakedness was depicted as a state of sin (Rev 16: 15), when sin first entered the world, that moment of disgrace and fear, when Adam and Eve recognised that they were naked and made garments out of fig leaves to cover their nakedness (Gen 3: 7).

God assured them that their man-made covering was not enough to rid their sins, and he stripped them of it and provided them a covering of his own. Just as Adam and Eve were covered with the covering of the Lord, so too, believers must also “ put on” Christ, and baptism is the divinely appointed way of doing this. “ For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3: 26-28)

Conclusion The idea and practice of baptism seems to be a divisive subject in the Christian community. Some think that it should be reserved for people who are old enough to make a mature commitment to Christ, while others believe that it is legitimate for the children of Christian parents to be baptised as a sign that the family is united in following Christ and to save the child in the event that he or she does not get the opportunity to accept

Christ before dying. Nevertheless baptism is regarded as an outer expression of an inner spiritual reality.

It symbolises Jesus's death, burial and resurrection and unites believers with Christ in the Kingdom of God. Baptism itself does not save, and therefore a person must be a Christian before the actual, public water baptism. Repenting of sins and accepting the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is what assures believers of salvation. When believers come to Jesus in this way, they are completely forgiven of their sins by God. This is atonement. When a person accepts Jesus, the Holy Spirit dwells in their hearts, and they become new creations, with a new hope and a changed life direction.

They are set free from the power of sin to live a new life in Christ. This is redemption. Such peoples' hope is in God's kingdom. They seek Jesus and his Kingdom as of first priority. (Matt 6: 33) They become children of God. They are saved and God sees them as his precious children. As they live out their journey on earth, they grow in Jesus' likeness, his holiness, and in his image. This is sanctification. Baptism is a symbol and public declaration of faith. It reveals atonement, redemption and sanctification. Baptism was commanded by God. It is an act of obedience. In the New Testament, baptism is about conversion and discipleship.

Baptism has corporate significance. The church is seen as a separate entity from the world, and faith and baptism are the distinguishing marks of followers of Christ. Baptism is the sign of becoming a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 28: 18-20); it is dying to the old, pre-Christian way of life and rising again to a new life as a follower of Jesus (Romans 6: 1-11); it is new birth into the Kingdom of God (John 3: 5). As a disciple of Christ, it's important to

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publicly stand with Him in celebrating a new life. That makes baptism a great first step for a new follower of Christ to take! Reference

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