

Baptism Optional or Essential?

by Vince Wall

Today in Australia there are many Christians who believe that is relatively unimportant which church they attend. As consequence, churches that practice believer's baptism, are receiving members who regard baptism as unimportant. What does the Bible teach?

Optional or Essential?

When the thief on the cross said: "*Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.*" Jesus replied:

"Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise"
(Luke 23:42-43).

The repentant thief had no opportunity to be baptized, yet he received the assurance from Christ that his eternal future was secure. We therefore conclude that baptism is not essential for salvation, so what is it?

1) Baptism is an act of **identification with Christ** and His saving work. It is a testimony that my old way of life is buried with Christ and I am walking in newness of life with Christ.

2) The New Testament pattern is belief and then baptism by immersion.

3) Jesus Himself set an example for us when He was baptized by John in the River Jordan and throughout His earthly ministry He baptized more people than John baptized though the actual baptisms were done by Jesus' disciples:

"After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized" (John 4:1-2).

4) Jesus commenced His ministry by being baptized (Mark 1:9) and concluded His ministry with a command to baptize.

5) The Great Commission requires Christ's disciples to baptize.

"And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have

commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus was Baptized

Baptism wasn't easy for Jesus. He made a deliberate choice to be baptized and travelled approximately 96 km from Galilee to the Jordan River where John was baptizing at a place called Aenon. Scripture states:

“And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan” (Mark 1:9).

Why did John go to Aenon at the Jordan River to baptize? A study of the Scriptures clearly reveals that baptism is immersion of believers in water. There is not one case of a believer in the Bible being sprinkled with water for baptism, nor is an individual case of a child cited. If John sprinkled people with water for baptism then he could have baptized them anywhere. Instead John chose a place where there was **much water**, as the Bible states:

“And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized” (John 3:23).

Baptism, for Jesus was a humbling experience. Many were being baptized, confessing their sins, but Jesus was the sinless Son of God with no sin to confess (Phil 2:5-8). However, as the Lamb of God He identified with sinners and later, on the cross, bore their sin *“in his own body on the tree”* (1Peter 2:24). As God manifest in the flesh, Jesus pleased His Father and showed true humility when He identified with the repentant people of His day by being immersed in the waters of the Jordan, for we read:

“And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mark 1:10-11).

The Early Church Baptized

The early Church followed the example of Jesus and practiced baptism by immersing believing people in water. The Word “baptize” is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*, which means “to immerse, submerge; to make overwhelmed.” God designed baptism and God's Word says it is by immersion. It is

an ordinance of God designed by God. We are not free to change God's design. Baptism by immersion pictures the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our unity with Him. If you change the design, you lose the visual message of our unity with Christ in His death and in His resurrection:

"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" (Rom. 6:3-4).

Though Martin Luther practiced infant baptism, he said:

"I could wish that such as are to be baptized should be completely immersed into the water, according to the meaning of the word" (Luther's Works, 1551 edition, Vol. 2, p.76).

There was no reluctance on the part of the early Christians to be baptized:

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

Those in Acts chapter 2 who were baptized, were old enough to understand the message of the Apostles, and they gladly obeyed the command. The first Church in history was a baptizing Church and there is no record of any believer refusing to be baptized.

The Practice of Baptism

After Philip preached the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch at Gaza, the Ethiopian eunuch said:

*"See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down **both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him"*** (Acts 8:38-39).

Baptism did not make the Ethiopian Eunuch a member of any church for he went home to Ethiopia where the Gospel had not even been preached at that stage. Baptism has nothing to do with church membership it is identification with Christ not a church.

As the Gospel spread from Jerusalem Philip preached in Samaria, and we read:

“When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12).

When the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, he was led blind into Damascus to the house of Ananias. Shortly afterwards he received his sight and was baptized (Acts 9:18).

Peter, speaking to the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, preached the Gospel that *“whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins”* (Acts 10:43). When the Gentiles believed, Peter asked,

“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized...and he commanded them to be baptized” (Acts 10:47-48).

At Philippi, Lydia the Jewess, had her heart opened by the Lord and was baptized with her household (Acts 16:14-15).

When Paul and Silas were cast into prison there was an earthquake and the Philippian jailor cried out to Paul and Silas:

*“Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, **Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.** And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour ... and was baptized... and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house”* (Acts 16:30-34).

The jailor’s household was baptized after the preaching of the Word. Paul did not tell the Philippian jailor to be baptized in order to be saved. He told him to be saved in order to be baptized. The Philippian jailor’s baptism came AFTER his believing, which shows the Scriptural pattern for New Testament Christians.

Baptism is an act of identification with Christ and His saving work, and the New Testament pattern is belief and then baptism.

The Corinthians were baptized:

*“And he (Paul) departed thence, and entered into a certain man’s house, named Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house joined hard to the synagogue. And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, **and were baptized”*** (Acts 18:7-8).

We see in the New Testament that when people were baptized there was:

1. Proclamation of the Gospel.
2. Salvation by faith in Christ.
3. Identification in the waters of baptism.

A study of the Scriptures clearly reveals that baptism is immersion of believers in water. There is not one case of a believer in the Bible being sprinkled with water for baptism, nor of an individual case of an infant being baptized. When households were baptized, they all were old enough to believe. Baptism of the believer is not essential for salvation, but is essential for obedience and identification with our Saviour Who bought us with His precious blood. If the Lord has commanded it, then it amounts to disobedience for any believer to refuse to obey His command.

What about Mark 16:16?

Didn't Jesus say that *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved?"* And doesn't this indicate that salvation is by both believing and being baptized and not by faith alone?

The rest of that verse states:

"...but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16).

It is the lack of saving faith that brings damnation. No person will be damned for not being baptized but if they fail to place their faith and trust in Christ they will spend eternity in the lake of fire for we read:

"But the fearful, AND UNBELIEVING, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Rev.21:8).

It is unbelief that brings condemnation and baptism is commanded to those who are already saved through faith in Christ. Baptism does not make salvation more secure for our security is obtained the moment we believe on the Lord Jesus on the grounds of what He has done for us on the cross and by His resurrection from the dead.