

Biblical Baptism

Various¹

Pastor Russ Kennedy

Today, we are graced and blessed to have a baptism. This is one of the two celebrations, directly ordered by the Lord for the church to participate in. Baptism and the Lords Table are called Ordinances of the Church. They are the only authorized symbols of the New Covenant community. Baptism represents our union in Christ and the church. The Lord's Table represents our fellowship with Christ and the church.

I want to summarize what we believe about baptism and why. I cannot cover it all. Most texts I will highlight and make a summary observation.

The Requirement to Baptize

The New Testament by precept, makes baptism necessary for the church to do. This means for the local gathered body to do and for all who believe to do.

The Precept from Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20)

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, immersing them in water [baptizing] them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In this text, the command is a compound one: go and make disciples. The disciple-making process was also two-fold: baptizing and teaching. This is fundamentally what it means to be a disciple. To publicly profess Christ through baptism so as to be identified as a disciple. Then, to be taught so that the disciple, the follower of Jesus, grows in purity, maturity and ministry.

We believe that obedience to the disciple-making command entails baptizing and teaching. Any religious institution that calls itself a church and does not conform to this clear command cannot say that it is obeying Christ.

The Pattern of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be immersed [baptized] by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was immersed [baptized], immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus was establishing a pattern of obedience. He overcame John’s objections. He was baptized as a means of identifying Himself with the remnant in Israel who were believers and repenters.

Jesus was baptized in a river. He went down into the waters and came up out of them. This shows us what He did. Without the rest of the following, we would only have a pattern and possibly a principle.

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The Practice of the Church

We find that immersion in water was the regular practice of the Apostles and the church in the book of Acts.

Acts 2:36-41

³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be immersed [baptized] every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” ⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” ⁴¹ So those who received his word were immersed [baptized], and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Verse 41 tells us that those who received or believed the preaching of Peter, those who accepted the gospel truths he taught, were baptized. There was no class. There was no waiting period to prove they were believers. Not that those things are necessarily wrong but the call to be baptized was issued with the call to faith. A person’s obedience to the gospel call and to the command to be baptized was sufficient evidence that they were to be baptized. Through baptism, the apostles knew who truly had believed and they were added to the list of those who were disciples. Why have this list? Some kind of simple roll of believes was being maintained in the early church. Maybe we have taken church membership too far. But certainly the elders in the New Testament churches knew who was joined to Christ and joined to the church.

Acts 8:34-40

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being immersed [baptized]?” ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he immersed [baptized] him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Here a person who is believing the gospel wants to be baptized. He indicates a pool of water. Once again, they go down into and come up out of the water. Luke seems to want to make a point. The drinking water that could have been sprinkled or poured on the head of the Ethiopian believer was insufficient. The fact that a pool was available is an essential part of the narrative in Luke’s mind and for us.

The Mode of Baptism

This then leads us to consider what is the Biblical mode of baptism. The word used in the Bible is *baptizo*. This transliterated in most English translations into *baptize*. From this word, the Biblical mode for baptism is to immerse in water.

Its Use in the Culture

The word is usually used to refer to placing a garment in water or dye. This is where the word originated and how it was used. Dye was never poured or sprinkled on garments. Garments

were always placed into the dye. Also, there was a rarely used meaning to refer to a kind of interconnected union.

This raises the question then about the emerging use of pouring in the early church. Shouldn't their understanding and practice at least open the door from non-immersion forms of the ordinance? Certainly not. The early church was infested with many heresies and unbiblical practices. It is historically inaccurate to say that the New Testament church's practice, being closer to the Apostles teaching and less subject to corruption over time, was therefore purer. If that were true, we would not have most of the Pauline writings. Think of the errors in doctrine and practice rampant in Corinth, Galatia and the churches Peter and Jude wrote to. So, the fact that early churches poured only means that early churches disobeyed the Scriptures, largely for convenience.

Its Use in the Language

The word we have in our English Bibles is "baptize" or some form of it. This word is a transliteration of the Greek word, *baptizo*. The word in the Greek always meant, to immerse, to place into, to bring into as to unite or join with. Many so-called Greek scholars who detect other uses of the word are being driven by their frameworks and not by the meaning of the word as used in the language of the day nor as intended by the Spirit. The word plainly and simply means, to immerse. If you substitute "immerse" or the corresponding form for the word baptism in every text it occurs in, the text will make plain sense, as you have heard me do tonight. If you substitute the word "pour" or "sprinkle", the sense of or the argument being made will be lost. Furthermore, when you accept the word meaning anything else than "immerse" then the other uses of the word are excluded. If the correct rendering is "pour" then you cannot sprinkle or immerse. If the correct rendering is sprinkle, then the other modes are also excluded.

From the Imagery (Romans 6:1-5)

Let me give you one example in which the word cannot mean "pour" or "sprinkle". Listen to Romans 6:1-5.

There is the ESV...

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been immersed/placed/united [baptized] into Christ Jesus were immersed/placed/united [baptized] into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by immersion/being placed/union [baptism] into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Now listen to the same text with "pour" and "sprinkle" substituted.

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been sprinkled/poured [baptized] into Christ Jesus were sprinkled/poured [baptized] into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by being poured/being sprinkled [baptism] into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

The NLT rendering blurs out the use of the word, substitutes united as the verb and makes the verb "immerse" into a noun, an object of the preposition "in" This has no foundation in the grammar. This is one of the places where the NLT is trying to make something clearer at the expense of the grammar and possibly, the truth.

What is clear is that the word represents going down into the grave and coming up from the grave. Further the word here is meant to represent union in death and union in resurrection.

Now, we understand that words can have more than one meaning. However, the primary meaning of a word should be understood consistently in texts unless or until there is a compelling, grammatical, contextual reason to understand the word differently.

The Candidate for Baptism

The Biblical command is to baptize those who profess belief in Christ as redeemer and ruler.

We are to baptize those who believe.

There is an obligation on the part of those who claim faith in Christ to bow to the Lord in obedience. In the scriptures, baptism is for those who are able to profess faith in Christ. When the gospel call is responded to, all through the New Testament, it is those and only those who are baptized. The Apostles in their preaching call people to believe and to be baptized as a step of obedience and to publicly profess faith.

We are to baptize those who want to be disciples.

There is an obligation on the part of the church to baptize those who claim faith in Christ. This is a part of the great commission. The Apostles clearly saw baptism as an obligation of the church.

We are not to baptize unbelievers.

Since we are to baptize those who do believe, then we must not baptize those who do not. Baptism does not save. Jesus' death and resurrection is what saves us. We are saved by faith through grace alone. Our obedience does not make us acceptable to God. Only Jesus' righteousness. The obedience of faith moves us to be baptized. To baptize those who do not believe is to nullify the true picture and purpose of what God has ordained in baptism.

This means that we do not baptize infants. Nor do we recognize and accept infant baptism as fulfilling the Biblical command. We have affirmed that we only accept into membership those who have a believing immersion. Why do we reject infant baptism?

There is no command to baptize infants. Since they are not believers and cannot be disciples, it would seem we would need a specific command to baptize them. We do not have such a command.

Contrary to what is commonly taught in many theological groups, including Catholicism, baptism is not the fulfillment of circumcision. You cannot draw a line from circumcision to baptism and thus say that since circumcision of infant boys was required, therefore baptism of all infants in a believing household is therefore required. Circumcision of males in the Old Testament is fulfilled by the circumcision of the heart carried out by the Holy Spirit at conversion.

No infant is baptized in the New Testament records. Some would say that at least in one text, the household of a believer was baptized which certainly must have included infants. I would say there is no evidence of infants in the household of the Philippian jailor, then you cannot use the text as a definitive proof-text that Paul and Silas baptized an infant. Further, consider carefully the text Acts 16:25-34. Now we do have a translation problem in the text which we will indicate in a moment.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸

But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. [ESV]

Note that verse 34 has been altered here to say something different than the original says. The NASB is closer, "³⁴And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

In other words, the Greek says, "they rejoiced greatly that he along with his household, had believed." Since this translation undercuts the primary text for baptizing infants, many translations have changed it so that it seems to say that he had believed and his whole household is rejoicing with him. I understand the motivation to translate the text that way. Truly, it is not what it says.

We believe that all persons, who confess Christ in the heart and with their mouth, should confess Him publicly. The only means to do that in the New Testament, is through baptism, that is, immersion in water in obedience to the Great Commission.

Reflect and Respond

The Invitation to Obey

You have a clear command...

You should believe in an obeying way...

Call to be pleasing to God in this step of obedience...