

What Is Baptism? (1st)

(Since the truth of baptism is essential to the identity of a New Testament congregation, we need to know what baptism is. This podcast begins this discussion. The question of the right to change the way that baptism was originally performed begins to be addressed with this broadcast.)

In our last session, we saw that both Baptists and Protestants affirm that baptism is associated with the validity of the congregation of the Lord. Therefore, it is essential that we know the truth concerning the doctrine of baptism. We need to know the mode, the subject, the purpose, and the administrator of baptism. While there may be other questions regarding this subject, I believe it can be agreed by the majority that these four things are foundational to the topic at hand.

The Mode of Baptism

I believe it is important to first see what the word means as it was used in the New Testament. Without question, scholars throughout the world who know the Greek language agree that the Greek word βαπτίζω means to dip or immerse. J. H. Thayer, in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, gives the primary definition as *to dip repeatedly, to immerge, or submerge*. Additionally, we could quote sources of all denominations as well as secular scholars to prove this point. While this should not be needful to do this, allow me to note that there are people who are so prejudice in their views that they refuse to admit this. Several years ago I attended a meeting of various ministers and men of different denominations who profess to believe the doctrines of grace. The purpose of the meeting was to get better acquainted and to encourage each other. At one of those meetings I was talking to an older Presbyterian minister and the subject of baptism came up. When I stated that the meaning of the Greek word for baptism meant to dip or immerse, he shouted to me, “The Greek word βαπτίζω never, ever meant to dip.” Needless to say, that conversation ceased. Thankfully, John Calvin admitted the truth of the meaning and practice of the word in New Testament times, though he believed “the church” (as he viewed it) has the authority change it. Listen to Calvin’s comments on Acts 8:38, when Philip baptized the eunuch.

Here we see how the rite of baptism was carried out by the men of long ago: they immersed the whole body in the water. The practice that has now become dominant is for the minister only to sprinkle the body of the head. But the trifling difference in the ceremony ought not to mean so much to us that we split the Church because of it, or throw it into confusion with disputes. Indeed we ought to fight even to the death a hundred times for the ceremony of baptism itself, since it has been delivered to us by Christ, rather than allow it to be taken away from us. But since we have evidence in the symbol of water of new life as well as our washing: since Christ represents His blood to us in the water, as in a mirror, so that we may seek cleansing for ourselves from it; since He teaches that we are recreated by His Spirit, so that we, being dead to sin, may live to righteousness (I Pet. 2.24), it is certain that we have everything that makes for the substance of baptism. That is why, this substance apart, the Church allowed itself freedom from the beginning to have slightly different rites. For some used to immerse three times, while others did it only once. Accordingly there is no call for us to be too particular about things that are not so necessary, provided that adventitious ceremonials do not contaminate the simple institution of Christ.

While Calvin says that too much should not be made over the mode to cause trouble, it is amazing that the reformers shed a lot of Baptist blood because they would not submit to sprinkling whether it is adults or children. In fact, during one of the ministerial meetings that I mentioned above, I reminded one Protestant minister that his forefathers persecuted my forefathers. He followed up with an agreement and stated that he “didn’t think it was a bad idea.” That was the last time I attended any of those meetings.

For those who may think that Calvin’s comments on Acts 8:38 was simply a side note, allow me to quote from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XV, paragraph/section 19, p. 524.

Whether the person baptised is to be wholly immersed, and that whether once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, is not of the least consequence: churches should be at liberty to adopt either, according to the diversity of climates, although it is evident that the term *baptise* means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive Church.

I am using Calvin’s *Institutes* as translated by Henry Beveridge. At the end of this quote there is a footnote giving the quote from the French edition. (Calvin originally wrote his *Institutes* in French.) The footnote has the French quote and the English translation from the French. Here is the English translation.

Moreover, it is a matter of no importance whether we baptise by entirely immersing the person baptised in the water, or only by sprinkling water upon him, according to the diversity of countries, this should remain free to the churches. For the sign is represented in either. Although the mere term Baptise means to immerse entirely, and it is certain that the custom of thus entirely immersing was anciently observed in the Church.

Though Calvin thought that “we ought to fight even to the death a hundred times for the ceremony of baptism itself,” he did not consider the mode to be important enough to worry about. Since the Lord used the Greek word βαπτίζω for baptize and not use any other word (I plan to discuss this in more details in a future broadcast.) why should we think we would have the option to change the practice to a different form? If the truth about baptism is essential to authenticating the church or of congregation of God, why put that in jeopardy by changing the form of how baptism is to be performed? Since baptism is a command and not an option (cf. Acts 10:48), why run the risk of violating a command of the Lord by following convenience or personal preference? Such practice is why modern so-called congregations have women ministers, allow sodomites and all other ungodly lifestyles contrary to the Scriptures within their organizations. When anyone thinks he knows better than what the Lord inspired His writers of the Scriptures to pen, he is guilty of charging God with ignorance, to say the least. God knew what He meant when He inspired the authors of the Scriptures to write down what He wants us to know and to do. As Dt. 29:29 says, “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” In other words, what the Lord doesn’t want us to know He doesn’t tell us. They are secret to Him. However, what is revealed (or given) to us is given to us *forever to do*.

Yes, there are some things that are optional; such as, the eating of meat or not. But the Lord addressed them and the Scriptures are clear concerning these things. There is, however, no hint in the Word of God that baptism is to be performed in accordance with convenience or personal preference.

May we all humbly bow to the plain teaching of the Scriptures as we seek to honor the Lord while we live here as pilgrims and strangers in a sinful world.