

Baptism – Are We Distinctive?

INTRODUCTION

When one makes the Scriptures his or her authority for church practice, the question of Baptism will no doubt arise. This was true for Alexander Campbell, son of Thomas Campbell in the last century, and it is true for us today. That Jesus commanded baptism to take place there can be no doubt (Matthew 28: 19-20). However, there are three issues which today are "hotly" debated within THE church that relate to baptism:

1. Should Infants be baptized?
2. Does the form baptism takes (e.g. sprinkling, pouring, immersing) make any difference?
3. If one is saved by "faith", isn't baptism a work which therefore makes it unrelated to one's salvation?

Let's examine each of these questions and see what Churches of Christ have believed and taught from the Scriptures:

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

That faith is essential for one to be a Christian is affirmed by every movement, denomination, and sect within THE church. The baptism of infants, however, is accepted only by some (although they are the majority in terms of members). There is no direct reference to the

baptism of infants in the Scriptures. (Acts 16: 33 is often cited as evidence that a whole family including children was baptized – but, of course, no children are actually mentioned.) The Scriptures are filled with examples of adults being baptized, but one can only "imply" that children may have undergone this act as well. Churches of Christ have always maintained that we should practise what is explicitly taught and practised in the New Testament and not what is merely implied. Therefore, we offer baptism only to believing adults.

For discussion:

1. What do you think happens to infants or children who die? Do they need to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins?
2. Do you think it is possible for parents to have faith for their children? If so, when does such "proxy" faith end?
3. At what age do you think Churches of Christ should offer baptism to young people?

WHAT FORM SHOULD BAPTISM TAKE?

The Greek word used in the New Testament for baptism is "baptizo" which means "to immerse, plunge, or dip". To sprinkle or pour water on one's head was introduced later than the first century, first as an alternative if insufficient water was available, and then eventually as the norm for the church. While one might argue that "form" is really not significant, yet much of the symbolism of baptism (READ Romans 6: 3,4) is directly related to its form. While some may debate their preferences, God's express command in the Scriptures was that we be "immersed". Churches of Christ have held that it is inappropriate for men and women to determine if other forms are acceptable. Moreover, all denominations, movements, and sects accept immersion as a valid form of baptism, but not all accept alternative methods. Therefore, if we are to be united, it would seem only logical that we would accept the form common to all especially if this is the Biblical form.

For discussion:

1. Some churches allow those who have not been immersed to be members of their congregation. What do you think of this practice?
2. Do you think we should be able to change the "form" in which a command of Jesus is to be carried out? If not, how should we go about correcting changes which have occurred?

BAPTISM: FAITH OR WORK?

While baptism is an act which a person undergoes, it was never placed in the category of a "work" in the New Testament. Instead, it was seen as a "faith"-ful response to the command of Christ (MATTHEW 28: 19-20) and the Apostles who preached the gospel (ACTS 2: 38). In Paul's strongest treatise against "works" he acknowledges that all the Galatians were baptized (GALATIANS 3: 26-27). The Scriptures indicate that if baptism is a "work" it is a "work" of God, for only God can do the following which are directly associated with baptism:

1. Forgive sins (ACTS 2: 38)
2. Raise us to walk in a new life (ROMANS 6: 4)
3. Raise us with Christ (COLOSSIANS 2: 12)
4. Grant us a rebirth through a "washing" (TITUS 3: 5)

All of the above can only be accomplished by God. Nearly every denomination, movement and sect holds to the view that baptism is not merely an act of man, but is more significantly an act of God. As such, it could never be placed into the Pauline category of "works". Paul does not do so, and neither should we!

WHAT THEN IS BAPTISM?

Baptism is the active response of faith to the gospel. Through this act

God unites the individual with Christ's death and resurrection and forgiveness of sin is received by the one baptized. While some within our movement use the term "essential" to describe the significance of baptism, the Scriptures do not use this language, and our movement has generally preferred to use Biblical language. That baptism is universally recognized within THE church as "normative" for Christians cannot be denied. Its subjects and form are the only issues of disagreement, and Churches of Christ have sought to practise what is clearly described in the Bible and opposed alterations which have arisen either from implications within Scripture or practices introduced by THE church

For Discussion:

1. How does one know for certain that he or she is a Christian? Does the Word of God help in giving us any assurance that God has entered our lives? Is baptism any part of this assurance?
2. How do you think God views a person who knows what is right, but refuses to practise it? Does this apply to baptism?
3. Do you think that a person who has not been baptized, but has accepted the gospel, must deny that God has done anything in their lives without baptism?
4. Do you think all who want to become Christians should be baptized? Why or why not?

PRAYER SUGGESTIONS

1. Pray for those within your congregation who may be considering baptism, but have reservations because of what they have been previously taught.
2. Pray that the church might regain an understanding of baptism and use it as a unifying rather than divisive practice.
3. Pray that the church will find a way to maintain the Biblical practice, without having to deny the faith of those who have not been baptized.

