

WATER BAPTISM - FOR REMISSION OF SINS AND FOR SALVATION

By Allon Maxwell

There is a large part of the modern church for whom the meaning of water baptism as an essential, non-negotiable element of Christian obedience, has lost its impact. For various reasons, in different church cultures, the New Testament emphasis has changed. Too often, what passes now for baptism bears little resemblance to that first century urgent response to the Gospel, made under deep conviction of need for a new beginning with God.

Some make a total mockery of the meaning of belief by "baptising" infants who can neither believe nor repent. This is not New Testament baptism.

Others make the same mockery, by practising an indiscriminate adult baptism which requires no real belief of the Gospel of the Kingdom, and no meaningful repentance. This is not New Testament baptism either.

For others still, it has become somehow, a relatively unimportant "optional extra" for those who are already regarded as "saved" on the basis of an impulsive response to an altar call and a brief "sinners prayer", which invites a Jesus about whom they knew almost nothing at all, to "come into their hearts". This is not Biblical salvation.

It is also not uncommon to find those who reject the need for water baptism altogether, claiming that it is unnecessary in this "dispensation", for those who have been "born again" or "baptised with the Holy Spirit".

What does the Bible really say about baptism? Is it essential to salvation? How important is it?

In answering these questions, we shall carefully avoid technical discussion about the form of baptism and confine ourselves to the vital subject of the importance of baptism.

(I do have fixed conclusions about the appropriate form, but unless we come to grips with the other questions, there is no point at all in discussing that topic. Baptism, as we shall see, is really a matter of what is in the heart. Once the other fundamental issues of sin and righteousness and judgement are properly settled, a repentant heart rightly disposed towards God, will quickly resolve the issue of form.)

JESUS AND BAPTISM.

John the Baptist did say that the Holy Spirit baptism offered by Jesus will accomplish more than the water used by John. However, this does NOT mean that water baptism is therefore no longer important.

There can, of course, be no doubt that in the teaching of Jesus, water baptism cannot stand alone. Without the promised baptism with the Holy Spirit, water is simply a useless ritual.

Nevertheless, it is true that in making disciples, Jesus did baptise with water. ([John 3:22](#)) Although it seems that Jesus Himself did not personally do the actual baptising, it is clear that these baptisms carried out by His disciples, were performed at His direction and under His authority. ([John 4:1](#))

Further, it is clear that these baptisms could not be "Spirit baptisms".

They **were** baptisms in water. The Holy Spirit was not received by His disciples, until after His resurrection. ([John 7:39](#)) For those pre-crucifixion disciples the twofold baptism with water and spirit was separated by some significant time period.

When Jesus Himself came to be baptised in water by John, he said *"thus it is fitting for US to fulfil all righteousness"*. ([Matthew 3:15](#)) The "us" in this passage is not (as often thought by some) simply a "royal plural", but rather a statement by Jesus, of identity with all of US who also wish to join with Him in fulfilling all righteousness.

This is how we ALL make our own acceptable public profession that Jesus is now our LORD, that we are leaving the world behind and that we are now committed to the way of the cross.

This water baptism for Jesus was also the time of His own baptism with the Holy Spirit. ([Luke 3:22](#))

Apart from a couple of significant exceptions in Acts, (for obvious good reason), it is clear that this should also be the usual expectation of disciples who come to their water baptism with hearts fully prepared. ([Acts 2:38](#) & [Acts 19:1-6](#))

The continuing practice of the apostles and others recorded in the Acts clearly includes water baptism as the required response to the Gospel, as indicated by Jesus in [Mark 16:16](#) and [Matthew 28:19](#). In those cases where there were exceptions to the "normal" expectation, there can be no doubt that those first century followers of Jesus were not satisfied with either a water baptism without the Spirit ([Acts 8:14-17](#)) or a Spirit baptism without water ([Acts 10:44-48](#)).

In the teaching and example of Jesus, and of the first century church, BOTH water baptism and Spirit baptism are clearly considered to be necessary elements of discipleship.

BAPTISM AND BELIEF

In a number of places baptism is mentioned specifically in connection with belief.

This belief includes:

- * The Gospel or "The Good News about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ". ([Mark 16:15-16](#) & [Acts 8:12](#))
- * Jesus as Son of God. ([Acts 8:37](#))
- * Jesus as the crucified and risen saviour who forgives sin. ([Acts 2:23-24](#), [Acts 2:38](#) & [Acts 10:39-43](#))

In all of these references, the expected response to belief, is water baptism. It follows logically, that belief which does not lead to baptism is not really the sort of belief to which the Gospel calls us. Of course, a sham baptism is entirely possible without adequate belief, but the reverse is never envisaged anywhere in the New Testament. A real belief will always lead to an open-hearted submission to baptism.

BAPTISM AND REPENTANCE

The preaching of the Gospel convicts the hearer of sin. Baptism is the expected response from those who are willing to repent of their sin. ([Acts 2:38](#))

It follows logically that where faith in the Gospel is claimed without this response, there will be some hidden inadequacy in the professed repentance.

Again, of course, it is possible to be baptised without adequate repentance, but the reverse will never be true of real faith in the Gospel. A repentance which is real, will always lead to baptism.

BAPTISM AND FORGIVENESS

In a number of passages, forgiveness of sins is irrevocably linked to baptism. Of course, we must be clear that forgiveness also requires repentance and an adequate faith in the cross. Nevertheless, real repentance and saving faith lead directly to the water.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter called those heart-stricken Jews who were convicted of their part in the crucifixion of Jesus, to respond in a baptism for remission of sins.

[\(Acts 2:38\)](#)

The Apostle Paul was also expressly called by Ananias to a baptism in which his sins would be washed away. [\(Acts 22:16\)](#)

If sins are forgiven in the act of baptism, it follows that those who refuse to obey the Gospel call to repentance and baptism are not forgiven at all.

BAPTISM AND SALVATION

Jesus specifically said that BOTH belief in the Gospel and baptism were necessary for salvation. [\(Mark 16:15-16\)](#)

Peter also said that baptism in water saves. [\(1 Peter 3:21\)](#)

Of course, it is true that there are other elements in the plan of salvation which must not be ignored. However, that does not change what is said in these two Scriptures. Without baptism there is no salvation.

BAPTISM AND OUR FUTURE INHERITANCE

The Sermon on the Mount promises that the meek shall inherit the earth. [\(Matthew 5:5\)](#)

Those who share the faith of Abraham, are guaranteed a future share in his inheritance of the world. [\(Romans 4:13-17\)](#) This inheritance is conditional on being baptised into Christ.

Only if we have thus put on Christ, are we assured that we are heirs of these promises. [\(Galatians 3:26-29\)](#)

Without this baptism in water (and the guarantee from God which results from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit), there can be no inheritance. [\(Ephesians 1:13-14\)](#)

BAPTISM AND A GOOD CONSCIENCE

Peter says in his first epistle that true baptism is not simply getting wet!

The water baptism which saves, is a baptism which has to do with the conscience and the heart.

There are differing translations of [1 Peter 3:21](#), which express this from two points of view, both of which are equally valid in this context.

One translation (found in the NEB and KJV) places the emphasis on the appeal to God made by a conscience which is right towards God.

Other versions (RSV and NASB) place the emphasis on the repentant sinner's appeal to God for a clear conscience, (through the cleansing of the forgiven heart from guilt).

Either way, it is clear that without baptism there is no right hearts attitude toward God, and no REAL cleansing of the conscience from guilt.

In those cases where there is a failure to recognise the clear Bible teaching and the absolute necessity for baptism, both for remission of sins and for salvation, we must learn to recognise that the basic need is NOT continued theological argument about the merits of baptism!

Blindness to Bible teaching at this point is a SYMPTOM of another more basic problem. Those who have made their own repentance, and who truly know and love Jesus, will discern the fearful secret that in the lives of those who reject water baptism, there is still unresolved sin.

This is privileged information which enables us to pray intelligently for their very deep need.

The real need in such cases is a work of the Holy Spirit to bring sinners to conviction of specific sin and then to the Godly sorrow which leads to repentance. Only after that is achieved does discussion about baptism have any real importance for the individual.

Once conviction of sin and righteousness and Judgement has been established by the Holy Spirit, baptism in water is a commandment which comes direct from Jesus to the sinner. At that point each one of us makes our own decision to obey or continue in rebellion.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

Baptism is not simply a ritual without meaning or purpose.

It is meant to reinforce our understanding of what is happening to us when we are born again by the Spirit of God. It is meant to be an event which we can remember for the rest of our lives as the point where we found freedom from slavery to sin and the hopeless guilt which accompanies that slavery. It is the point of time where we are transferred from the dominion of darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of God; where our redemption becomes real, and our forgiveness is assured. ([Colossians 1:13](#))

The meaning which lies behind the ritual of baptism is described at some length in [Romans 6](#) and also in [Colossians 2:9-15](#) as:

- * A symbolic, but also very real death to past sins
- * A symbolic, but very real resurrection to a new life of obedience, righteousness and sanctification, which assures those who share in it, of the GIFT of eternal life.

It is clear that this death and resurrection is to be achieved only in the water baptism of the repentant sinner. By this symbolic action sinners appeal to God for forgiveness and a new relationship with Him, in which the promised Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth.

There is no scriptural warrant to offer forgiveness, new life in the Spirit and the promised future inheritance, without this baptism in water.

Nor, without this water baptism, is there any credibility for any claim to be born again or baptised with the Holy Spirit.

Yes, water baptism is a ritual, but it is a ritual which requires us to make a public confession before men of what is in our hearts towards Jesus. As such it is essential to our salvation. ([Matthew 10:32-33](#))
