

Christian Baptism: How Long Must I Wait?

As John the Baptist baptized the many people who had responded to his message, he looked at the crowd and saw an unlikely face. Unlikely, for John was calling the people to repentance, to confession of sinning against the Law of God and of a commitment to a renewed life. Jesus had no need for repentance, for he had led a sinless life, in complete obedience to the Law.

In that context, John's question was understandable: "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" Jesus' response was, "Let it happen this time, in order to fulfill all that is righteous." And so John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. The term baptize means "to immerse; to submerge," as in liquid, so when Jesus was baptized, he was immersed into the waters of the River Jordan.

Jesus Commanded Baptism For His Disciples

Jesus did not instruct his followers to practice many rituals, or specific physical activities having spiritual connotation, only two to be exact: The practice of taking the bread and the wine of communion; and the baptism in water of disciples. In Matthew 28:19,20 he gave this order: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Mark records the order similarly, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15,16) We see from these verses that baptism was important in the Christian experience.

Baptism at Pentecost

When the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost in Jerusalem, and thousands were converted to belief in Jesus, they asked "What shall we do?" Peter responded in Acts 2:38, "Repent and *be baptized* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Verse 41 tells us that "those who received his words were baptized." Notice that they got baptized that

same day. There was no delay after hearing the word of Christ and accepting Him: They were immediately baptized.

Consider too, that about 3,000 were baptized that day according to the record of Acts 2:41. Think about that. Pentecost started with 120 disciples, and in one day 3,000 were added and baptized. It doesn't seem like there was a long period of instruction to precede baptism, does it?

No Delay Before Baptism Upon Belief

Later we see that the church in Jerusalem was scattered due to persecution, and Philip was drawn to Samaria where he preached the Gospel and demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:12 tells us, "When they believed Philip as he preached the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

Later in that same chapter of Acts, in verses 26 - 40, we find the account of Philip explaining the Gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch while riding in a chariot. In verses 36-38 we read, "And as they went along the road they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?' And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.' And he commanded the chariot to stop and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him."

In the above instances, there is *no period of delay* after the expression of belief in Jesus as the Son of God, the Redeemer of mankind, before being baptized. It would happen on the same day! We see the same thing in the case of the house of Cornelius when Peter brought the Gospel to them. This we find at Acts 10:46-48: "Then Peter declared, 'Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for some days."

An equally emphatic case is found in Acts 16 when Paul and Silas were jailed for the Gospel's sake in

Philippi. They spent the night singing praises to God and an earthquake rocked the jail, bursting open all the doors. When the jailer fell at the feet of Paul and asked, "What must I do to be saved?," Paul told him to "believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, and your household." In verses 32 and 33 we find, "And they spoke the Word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family."

Here were gentile, (non-Jewish) people, unacquainted with God's Word either by way of Judaism or prior exposure to Christianity, who heard the Word of Jesus and the same day were baptized; the whole family! How different that is from the practice of those groups who have several week's preparation before people are "ready" for baptism. It is obvious from these texts that baptism is not a proof that you have turned your life around and mastered all your bad habits and demonstrated that you are keeping God's laws. It is simply a demonstration that you have heard the message of salvation in Christ and put your trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation and committed your life to his service. That is why it only takes less than a day to qualify for baptism.

What Does Baptism Signify?

The Apostle Paul took pains to explain the meaning of baptism in Romans 6:3-8. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 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. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him."

Some have been taught that the act of Baptism is itself a Sacrament, something that in itself renders us holy. Such a belief looks at the event itself as possessing power, rather than signifying something in the person's life. Considering the comments of the Apostle Peter could

be helpful in this regard. Peter draws a comparison between Christian baptism and the family of Noah passing through the flood in the Ark, in which "eight souls were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him." (1 Peter 3:20-22)

Think closely of that picture. Noah and his wife; the sons of Noah and their wives enter the Ark, turning their backs on the world they have known all their lives. They ride for weeks through the water of the flood, their former lives buried beneath the waves. Finally, they arrive on dry land and begin a new life, totally new. This is a new world they have entered. They could not leave the old life behind, start a new life for awhile and then get on the Ark. No, their new life could not start until they had passed through the waters. It is similar with Christian baptism.

Baptism represents burial and resurrection. When the message of Christ bears fruit in our hearts by the leading of the Holy Spirit, we are moved to repent. We find ourselves regretting the way we have lived in disobedience to God's will, and desirous of entering into a relationship with The Holy God through Christ. We discover a desire to live a godly life, a life of holiness and love. So, as Jesus did, we enter into a new life, a life of dedicated service to God. In the most real sense, we die to the life we have known, and are birthed spiritually into a new life and relationship. God is now our Father.

Baptism is a public display that we have made that decision and commitment and have entered into a new relationship. As we go down into the water, we symbolically and spiritually die to ourselves and our former sins and that old life is buried; as we rise from the water we symbolically and spiritually are resurrected to a new life in Christ. This is why in verse 11 of Romans 6, Paul says, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Please note the phrase, "alive to God in Christ Jesus." It is only "in Christ Jesus" that we can be "alive to

God.” We could not please The Holy God before being birthed into new life in Christ, due to our sinful character and practice; we cannot please God in our own power even in our new life, it is the *work of Christ on the Cross* and now in our daily lives that brings pleasure to the Father.

That is why it is ludicrous to instruct people that they must first clean up their lives and adapt themselves in obedience to God’s law, and after having done so, and gone through an extended period of instruction, only then can they get baptized in water. There is no cleaning up, no adapting, no conforming, without the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus.

As written above, once we have acknowledged Jesus as our only hope, and have believed in our hearts that He is the Son of God, and decided to follow Him as He empowers us by the Holy Spirit, we are ready for baptism in water. That is, baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It is unscriptural to require an extended period of schooling before entering into the rite of water baptism. So if you have received Jesus as your Savior and wish to follow Him in baptism, let nothing keep you from doing so. And may the grace of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be yours in abundance by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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