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The Doctrine of Baptism and Its Controversies

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Christianity, Baptism has been a topic of strong debate both theologically and practically. There are two major sections of debate that are currently fought in Christian circles. The first is the question of for whom is baptism intended? The second question is how should one be baptized? The questions have long been argued for both sides and there are favorable evidences for the various positions on all sides. The sides can be divided into two main groups, Protestants and Catholics. However, within the two main groups there are also sub-groups that add many beliefs to the different topics that this paper will discuss.

A lot of the arguments are speculative as they are not clearly discussed in Scripture. It is this ambiguity that has led to many heated debates and splitting of denominations. What can be agreed upon is that baptism is clearly a Christian teaching.

Can the questions about baptism be properly answered? Can we come to the correct understanding of the theology of baptism? The purpose of this inquisition is to look at the various arguments and establish a historical benchmark that can be used to determine what the proper beliefs are for baptism in the church today.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

The first examination must be the question of what is the definition of baptism? Baptism can be defined simply as an act of immersing something in water for purification.¹ This of course is not so simple when discussing the term baptism in Christian circles. In the church today baptism can be understood to be many things. It can be sprinkling if you are Presbyterian. It can be “dunking” or immersion if you are Baptist. It is for infants if you are Catholic or

Lutheran and provides salvation. In other words, Baptism takes many forms. But which methods are right? Are they all equal?

To get these answers one must turn to the history of baptism and then the Scriptural basis for the various arguments and objections of the methods. The Old Testament did not have baptism as is thought of for the Christian church so it is only practical to examine the New Testament on the subject.

HISTORY OF BAPTISM

To properly understand the theology behind baptism and how it is applicable today, it must first be understood how baptism was used in Biblical times. The first time baptism is mentioned within Scripture is when John the Baptist was baptizing followers in the river. In the first chapter of the book of John the Pharisees ask him why he is baptizing. John’s response was that he baptizes with water. From this passage it is understood that baptism definitely involves water, but it does not answer the question as to the mode of baptism, or who the baptism was intended. In the next few verses John would go on to baptize Christ Himself. It can be argued that because Christ was baptized then it definitely is not an action that provides Salvation, but that will be discussed later.

Baptism was an integral part in the first century church. In the book of Acts chapter nineteen, Paul is found to be baptizing early Christians. They had been baptized by John, but now were being baptized into the hope that is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is clear from Scripture the place of baptism.

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Peter also discusses baptism in his first epistle chapter three. If both of the two prominent proclaimers of the Gospel in the Bible proclaimed baptism, it must be taken as an important part in the walk of a Christian. However, the problem is that those passages do not explain the methods, or modes, of the baptisms themselves.

PURPOSES OF BAPTISM

There are several beliefs as to the purpose of baptism. Two shall be discussed here. The first purpose is for Salvation, this is primarily believed by Catholics. The second is as a sign of repentance which is primarily believed by Protestants. The two groups both claim that their position is correct and that Scripture backs the theology. However, groups may have arguments supporting their belief style, but can both groups be theologically correct?

Sacrament for Salvation

Catholics believe that Baptism is a sacrament necessary for salvation to take place. For this reason, they practice infant baptism as well as adult baptism. The belief is that as the baptism washes away the original sin, the only grace giving factor needed would be penance. Constantine used this practice as means for political gain. According to Lutzer, Constantine viewed baptism as the link by which church and state would become united.

Catholic doctrine does teach that baptism is a means of justification. They believe that the baptism actually washes away what is known as original sin. This means that infant baptism

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is necessary for children so that if they were to die early they would be covered by the baptism for salvation. ⁶ To the Catholic, the purpose of this baptism is to wash away the sin.

As stated before, the further sins are cured by what is known as penance. These are acts that would continually cleanse one of their sin. However, Catholics and others that support infant baptism acknowledge that there is no clear Scripture that would indicate this doctrine. ⁷ To support their claims of infant baptism they turn to the fact that Scripture was written primarily to adults but that does not mean that children are excluded from the teachings of Christ and his disciples in the first century. ⁸

Believer’s Baptism

Contrary to what the Catholics believe, Protestants, especially Baptists, believe that baptism is only for the believer after making a confession of professed faith. They acknowledge that baptism is not a right of salvation, meaning that baptism itself does not earn or grant one’s salvation. Baptism is merely an outward showing of one’s decision to follow Christ.

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie points out that people were baptized in the Bible by John not for salvation, but rather as a sign that they were following John’s teachings in expectancy of the Messiah who would come after him. ⁹ They believe that baptism is not a cleansing of sin, but an outward sign and a seal of a greater commitment. ¹⁰

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⁷ Boyd and Eddy.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, "Dr. Ryrie's Articles," (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010).
These Protestant groups believe that one should only be baptized after a clear profession of Salvation.\(^\text{11}\) Since infants and very small children could not possibly make a clear profession of faith, many Protestants do not believe in the practice of infant baptism. However, they do not list an age that a child would suddenly be able to become aware of their sin and make this profession of faith. Therefore, one cannot determine who should or should not be baptized based on age but rather based on whether or not they have made a profession of faith in Christ.

The Scriptural backing for this position comes partly from Matthew 28:19-20 where the disciples are commanded to go and make disciples and to baptize them. This Scripture shows that the baptism is for the context of disciple making and not for people who are too young or not able to make a decision to follow Christ.\(^\text{12}\)

**MODES OF BAPTISM**

The purpose of baptism is not the only area of the ordinance that is widely debated amongst theological circles. The mode, or method, of baptism is also widely contested. Today there are three popular modes. These modes are sprinkling, pouring, and immersion.\(^\text{13}\)

J. I. Packer concludes that no particular mode of baptism is prescribed in the New Testament, and he further argues that all three modes fulfill the definition of baptizmo, which is Greek for baptism, by going under and emerging from pure water.\(^\text{14}\) The early church fathers seemed to understand that baptism was primarily to be conducted by immersion. However, they

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\(^{12}\) Boyd and Eddy.


also understood that there would be times when immersion was not a possibility and allowed for sprinkling or pouring to be used instead.15

Some denominations, however, argue that immersion was not used at all. Instead, they argue that sprinkling or pouring were used as evidenced in historical Jewish culture.16 Others argue that the Biblical texts say that they went into or came out of the water. They argue that this would indicate an immersion approach.17

One support for immersion comes from Colossians 2:12 that speaks of the burial of man in baptism.18 This picture of a burial would seem to indicate that the immersion under the water would be symbolic of someone being buried into the ground. This picture is also used for the resurrection of Christ. The symbol of coming up out of the water is used to indicate that resurrection. Paul seems to solidify this picture of baptism in Romans chapter six.19

The problem with both arguments is that the Bible does not give a specific instruction as to the mode of baptism. Scripture is silent on the details of the practice so there is no guidance as to an official method. Any specific belief is gained by inference from the Biblical itself as well as the historical context. In other words, much of the belief system surrounding the modes of baptism come from personal preference or bias.

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16 Ryrie, Basic Theology.
CONCLUSION

While all of the sides of the various arguments make compelling arguments, it is hard to determine strictly from Scripture what the correct methods of Baptism are. It can easily be decided from Scripture that baptism is not necessary for salvation itself. If it were, the thief would not be with the Savior in paradise as Jesus had promised him.

It can also be confirmed that because baptism is not necessary for salvation, then it is not a requirement to baptize infants for their sin either. However, there is nothing in Scripture that would prohibit a child from being baptized as a sign of promise or dedication. This type of baptism would be similar to a baby dedication.

What is not clear from Scripture is the mode that should be prescribed for baptism. It can be satisfactorily argued that any of the three options of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion are the proper protocols for baptism in the church today and the ones used during Biblical times in the first century church. What is important to remember is that the mode and practice of the baptism is not as important as the message it sends, the message that one has accepted Christ.

It is clear that though there are guidelines and verses to recommend certain aspects of the ordinance of baptism, it is not a debate that will die any time soon within the Christian world. Denominations will continue to have their set doctrines on the practice, and probably will never agree to what should or should not be done.
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