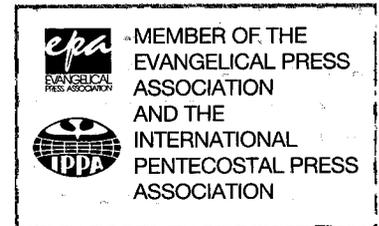
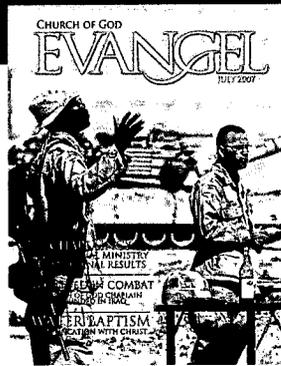


by
JACKIE
DAVID
JOHNS

WATER BAPTISM

WE BELIEVE in water baptism by immersion, and all who repent should be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

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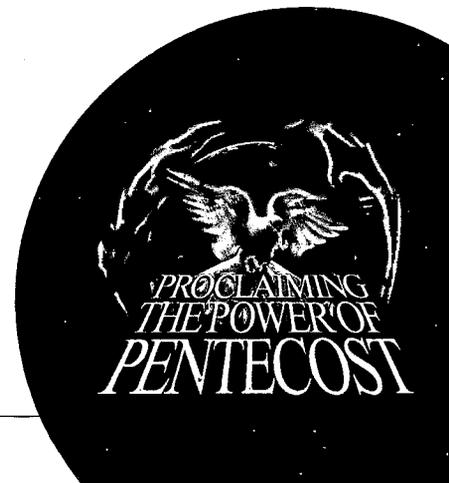
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IT MAY BE ARGUED that water baptism is the oldest of the Christian practices. Yet, there is much disagreement about its meaning and place in the Christian life. Some consider it the event by which individuals are born again. Others see it as “the doorway” to church membership. Others treat baptism as simply an act of obedience, one that provides a symbolic testimony to a past spiritual experience. Still others have concluded that since it is “just a symbol,” it is an unnecessary work and perhaps even an obstacle to true faith. How should we understand water baptism in the life of the believer and the church?

Baptism and the Kingdom of God

In New Testament Greek the word for *baptism* (*baptizo*) means “to immerse” or “to dip.” The common understanding was that to be baptized was to be dipped or placed fully beneath the surface of water, typically as a ceremonial bath. While the practice may be traced to other ancient Middle Eastern religions, it was introduced into Judaism during the time between the Old and New Testaments as a ritual of ceremonial cleansing for Gentiles who were being inducted into the nation of Israel. These rites of initiation for proselytes to Judaism became the model for Christian initiation rites.

John the Baptist prophetically proclaimed that even the most religious descendants of Abraham needed to repent and be baptized for cleansing if they desired to enter the coming kingdom of God. Jesus was baptized by John before He began His ministry (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21, 22), and this was done to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). From the earliest days of His ministry, Jesus practiced water baptism, even though His disciples were actually the ones who performed the ceremony (John 3:22-26; 4:1, 2).

The final command of Christ before His ascension into heaven was that His followers make disciples of all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:16-20). The apostles thus understood water baptism to be an essential component of following Jesus. From the Day of Pentecost forward they preached, “Repent, and each of you be baptized” (Acts 2:38, *NASB*). The gospel of Christ calls individuals to repent of sin, believe on Jesus as God’s only begotten Son, and be baptized.

It is important to keep in mind that in the New Testament there are baptisms that are contrasted with and/or parallel to immersion in water. John the Baptist instructed that while he baptized in water, the One who came after him would baptize in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). The experience of being baptized in the Holy Spirit, or receiving the gift of the Spirit, was clear-



ly distinguished from water baptism (see Acts 1:5; 8:12-17; 10:1-48; 11:15, 16). The Scriptures also make reference to being baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Water baptism thus serves as the template for understanding other Christian experiences.

Water baptism has come to be identified as either a *sacrament* or an *ordinance* of the church. The word *sacrament*, from the Latin *sacramentum*, emerged in early-church history in reference to those acts of worship that by their very nature serve as signs of the sacred or holy. They are often referred to as outward signs of inward grace, and so they are closely associated with God’s sanctifying grace. These included baptism and Communion and other ceremonies of the church (confirmation, anointing for healing, marriage, etc.). In an effort to avoid a perceived Catholic emphasis on the sacra-

ments as means of grace that are under the control of the church, some Protestants have chosen instead to focus on those rituals instituted by Christ himself. These *ordinances* of the church are those acts of worship that were ordained or commanded by Jesus during His earthly ministry. The New Testament records three such commandments—water baptism (Matthew 28:19), footwashing (John 13:14) and Communion (Luke 22:17-19; Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Those who reject the use of the word *sacrament* often view the ordinances as symbolic acts of obedience to the commands of Christ.

This modern debate between *sacrament* and *ordinance*, however, may cause us to miss the deeper significance of water baptism. Baptism and Communion were first called *mysteria* by the early church. The word *mystery* was taken from the New Testament Greek word *musterion*, meaning “that which is revealed.” For the first Christians, it was a technical term that they used in reference to the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and to the extension of the Incarnation through His body, the church (Romans 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:7, 8; Ephesians 1:8-10).

Baptism as a Sacred Pledge

As the church made the transition from thinking and writing primarily in the Greek language to the use of Latin, it chose the Latin word *sacramentum* as the primary translation for the Greek word *musterion*. At the time of this transition, *sacramentum* did not yet have the meaning of being a sign of the sacred; that definition would come later as a result of the church’s use of the word to refer to the most sacred worship events. The original meaning of *sacramentum* was “an oath.” A primary use in ancient Rome was to the oath a soldier took upon entering the army. This oath was a pledge of loyalty to his commanding officer with an emphasis on absolute obedience. In return, the officer accepted full responsibility for the actions of his soldiers that were carried

out under his command. This was the meaning of *sacramentum* when Christians first used the word in reference to water baptism. Water baptism was a ceremonial enlistment in the army of Christ, the *milita Christi*. It signified the covenant that exists between Christ and His followers.

The word *sacramentum* provided continuity between Jewish and Christian understandings of baptism. Proselytes to Judaism were joining the nation of Israel by entering into the covenant God had made with Israel. The process required that they know the law of Moses. Just prior to baptism, they were examined to determine if they knew the expectations of the Law and, in particular, whether they knew the consequences of breaking the Law. Entering the covenant of Israel required a commitment or oath to be governed by the Law—in essence, a *sacramentum*. Christian baptism found its central meaning in this Jewish ritual. It was above all else a ceremony in which the believer was inaugurated as a full member of the covenant between God and His people, the new covenant of Jesus Christ. This covenant required a pledge of absolute loyalty to Jesus as the promised Messiah, God's only begotten Son.

It may be helpful to view water baptism as functioning much like a modern wedding ceremony. Prior to the wedding a couple has already established a relationship and pledged loyalty and faithfulness to each other. The bonds of devotion have already been born within them. They know and are committed to each other. The ceremony is a necessary event that seals and authenticates their covenant of marriage. The ceremony also serves as the ground for the legitimate consummation of their marriage, yet to come. The ceremony is a bridge between what is and what is to come. It does not magically cause the couple to become one. It does publicly (and legally) mark the transition of the couple from a state of betrothal into the covenant of marriage.

In a similar fashion, water baptism does not give birth to the believer's rela-



tionship with Christ and His church; those relationships should have already been established since they began at the moment of sincere repentance and faith. Baptism does seal and authenticate the believer's relationship with Christ and the church. It publicly joins the individual to Christ in a way that celebrates and extends the reign of Christ through His covenant. We might rightfully refer to baptism as the believer's ordination to ministry. The believer is thereby commissioned to live a life of service to Christ.

The centrality of water baptism in the New Testament and church history makes it clear that it is more than a symbolic act. A symbol represents or points to something other than itself. Symbols do not share the nature or character of the things they point toward. A police officer's badge is but a symbol of authority. As used in the Scriptures a *sign* is evidence of the very thing it points toward. Signs are the first appearances of something that is coming. They carry the flavor and character of the reality they signify. For example, the miracles performed by Christ were referred to as signs of the kingdom of heaven; they were evidence that Jesus was the King and in Him the Kingdom was present. They were not simply symbols of a kingdom that was merely promised. In the New Testament, baptism is a sign of the presence and

working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the church. The Spirit is actually present with the church and the believer in the water.

Identifying With Christ Through Baptism

Water baptism is further a sign of identification with Christ, both for the church which baptizes and for the believer who is immersed. Burial in water signifies the church's and the believer's identification with Christ in His death (Romans 6:3, 4). Ascension from the waters identifies the church and the believer with Christ in His resurrection (Colossians 2:12). Washing away the filth of life identifies the participants with Christ as the fulfillment of righteousness (1 Peter 3:21). Water baptism is a sign of these present realities in the life of the church.

We must therefore believe that God's grace is present in baptism. The grace of justification, the grace of the new birth, and the grace of sanctification are abundantly present when a sincere believer is baptized in water. The event does not initiate these works of grace, but it does inaugurate a new dimension of them in the life of the believer as a member of the body of Christ. In other words, water baptism is not an event of special grace being dispersed by the church. It is a special event that extends and gives expression to God's abundant grace in the life of the believer and the church. It is a sign that the covenant of Christ with His church is dynamically present in the world. In baptism, we are with the church joined to Christ in His death and resurrection, and we are sealed by the Holy Spirit as members of His body who now live in the hope of His return. In water baptism we share in the abundant grace that belongs to those who live in covenant with Christ. ☩



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