

Baptism: For Whom?

The Purpose of Baptism

Turn to Mark 1. "Baptism is an outward sign of an inward choice." That's what some believe about baptism, and that is often taught, but I do not think it is true. "Outward," yes, but I'm not sure about the "sign" part.

What often goes along with this is that baptism is a way of telling the world that we are choosing to follow Christ. I do not think that is true, either. Baptism is how we tell Christ that we are choosing to follow him, would be closer.

For who are we baptized? That is the question I'd like to answer today. In the process we'll also get to talk about God's gift to us all, and that is a happy by-product.

But what does baptism itself mean? For whom are we baptized, for people or for God? That's what we will go after.

We believe a certain truth that affects how we see baptism. We believe this: "God is more interested in the attitude in our hearts and minds than he is in our actions." Do you believe that? We are taught that, and most of us believe it at least in part.

We believe this in order to avoid a certain evil, the evil of people doing the right action, like baptism, but in their heart and mind they don't care about God at all. That is an evil, and we are right to avoid it. Baptism without caring about God means nothing at all.

But we also know that's not the whole story. God says do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not lie. Those are *actions*, and in these it does not matter what the attitude of the heart is: the act of stealing is wrong, and committing adultery is wrong, and lying.

God cares about what's going on in our heart and mind, and he cares about our actions, and for now we'll just leave it at that. So, for whom are we baptized?

Mark 1:4 - *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Let's start from the end and work to the start. What people want is the forgiveness of sins, and that's what they will get if they do what John says they should do.

John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What should people do, in order to get forgiveness? They need a certain kind of baptism, a baptism of repentance, a repentance baptism.

To repent means to decide to live in God's ways, and turn from other ways of living if we're doing that. If people will do a repentance baptism, their sins will be forgiven.

We tend to separate these two into "repent" and "be baptized," and that's okay. We also tend to say that what really matters is the repentance, rather than the baptism.

I just want you to notice that the Scripture does not say that or anything like that. If we say that what really matters is the repentance, not the baptism, we are showing our own prejudice, something we decided was true before we read this.

A fair and natural reading of the Scripture, a naïve reading of the Scripture, if we did not "know better," would be that repenting and being baptized go together and should not be separated. When they are together, a repentance baptism, they bring forgiveness of sins.

Now turn to Acts 2. Peter preached this sermon 7 weeks after Jesus died and rose. He has told the Jews in Jerusalem that God sent Jesus to bring all of God's kindness and blessing to the Jews, and the Jews rejected Jesus and handed him over to be crucified.

They're in big trouble with God. The Jews believe Peter, are very distressed, and ask the right question: "what should we do?" In Acts 2:38 we get Peter's answer to that crowd.

Acts 2:38 - Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Repent and be baptized, every one of you. We can decide that the repenting was for God, and the baptism was for the people watching. But it does not say that. That crowd is worried only about God, against whom they have sinned and rebelled.

How will they deal with God? How can they save themselves from the judgment that God will surely send, because they have rejected and humiliated his Messiah?

The answer is two things: repent and be baptized. And many did repent and were baptized. Again, a simple straight forward reading of the Bible would lead us to believe that these were both important, that God wanted both, that they should not be separated.

If they would repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus, their sins would be forgiven, and the God would give them his Spirit. What an amazing gift came to those people who repented and were baptized: forgiveness of all their sins, and the Holy Spirit as a gift.

I want to say here there every baptism text is like this. There is no place in the Bible that says baptism is an outward sign; no place that says baptism is how we tell people about an inward choice we're making toward God.

A straight forward reading of the Bible would lead us to believe that we are baptized for God, because God wants to see it, just as much as God wants to see repentance and God wants to see faith.

Acts 22 - in Acts 9 we can read about how Paul met the Lord on the road to Damascus. Paul was going there to persecute Christians, whom he hated. He saw a bright light on the road, and heard a voice that said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He said, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice answered, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now go into Damascus, you will be told what to do."

Thirty years later Paul was in Jerusalem, and he was giving his testimony to a crowd. He was telling them what happened on the road 30 years earlier, when he saw the bright light, and what happened in Damascus when he got there.

A believer named Ananias came to Paul, and as Paul tells his story 30 years later, this is what Ananias said to Paul:

Acts 22:16 - And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

And now, what are you waiting for? I love that line - Paul's been waiting for someone to come tell him what to do, is what he's been waiting for. But it means that this is urgent. There should be no more delay. Get with it.

Be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name. Be baptized and wash your sins away. This sentence connects baptism and forgiveness of sins tightly to each other. So, does putting our bodies in water automatically wash away our sins?

No, there's another phrase: *calling on his name.* *Be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.* The effectiveness of baptism is not that we get dunked. There is no magic in that, no power in the water.

Being baptized *is* calling on the Lord Jesus. How do we call on the Lord Jesus for forgiveness? We are baptized. The baptism itself is our call to the Lord. The power is not in the water. Baptism is a call to the Lord.

In NT times, most believers were actually saved in the water, because they understood that if they wanted forgiveness, and the Spirit, if they wanted to follow Christ and be children of God, the way to tell this to God was to be baptized. That's how they told him.

Turn to Mark 10. This brings up another matter - what about children who grow up in the church? What about them before they are baptized? Are their sins not forgiven, and does the Spirit not work in their lives? Yes.

The NT does not how to baptize children, at least not to my satisfaction. What we do know is that Jesus used little children as examples of how to receive eternal life.

People brought little children to Jesus so Jesus would touch them and bless them, and the disciples scolded the people. Jesus told the disciples: "No!" And Jesus got intense.

Then he said (Mark 10:15): *Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*

Little children, who were not baptized by John the Baptist or anyone else, not only received the kingdom of God but were *models* of how to receive God's gift to people.

So, children with faith are pre-baptized believers. They need to get baptized when they are of age, but before that they are already models of how to receive the kingdom of God.

That's what Dawson is doing today, being baptized as a confirmation to God that he wants all the kingdom offers, that he wants to follow Christ.

Turn to 1 Peter 3. We'll look at one more Scripture about baptism. Peter compares baptism to the flood, to Noah in the ark. Noah and his family were saved in the ark by going "through the water." So also with believers coming to Christ.

1 Peter 3:20b-21 - *In [Noah's ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

"Baptism now saves you." There's another one of those lines that if it was not in the Bible, we'd say that was bad theology. But there it is - baptism now saves you.

"Not removing dirt from the body" - baptism saves, not just by putting a body in water. There is no magic in putting a body in water. It takes off some dirt, but that's all.

So how does baptism save? It is a pledge of a clear conscience toward God. Baptism speaks to God. Baptism says from the heart, "I trust you, I want to live in your ways, God, I want to follow Jesus." Baptism itself says that to God. That's how baptism saves.

And the power is in the resurrection of Jesus. Baptism now saves you, not the removal of dirt from the boy but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. *It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ* - the power that raised Jesus is the power that saves us.

We are baptized for God. Baptism is not a sign for people, it is a message to God. It is good for people to see others baptized, because it is good for us to watch each other give God this message.

Baptism is how we say "I believe in you, Lord, I want to live your way, I want forgiveness of sins and I want the Holy Spirit."

To people who have grown up believing, these things are already a reality, because for God the faith of children is not only as good as adult faith, if anything it's better.

But that does not make baptism a sign for people, as if the heart choice was for God and the baptism for the world. No, baptism is still a message first to God. Jesus says "follow me," and by being baptized we say to Jesus, "yes."

When children who grow up believing are baptized, they are affirming for God the trust and obedience that they've already been living.