



Digging Deeper Week 3

Dive

Church history reveals that baptism has sparked controversy and division throughout the centuries. As we look to the Scriptures, we find that Jewish baptisms were more like ceremonial purifications for people and items, such as the purifications we see in Leviticus 8:6 and Exodus 19:10. John the Baptist led his followers to be baptized as a sign of repentance (Luke 3:16). However, Christian baptism was instituted by Christ. In what is referred to as the Great Commission, Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

The birth of the church was accompanied by baptism (Act 2:38), and we find that New Testament churches practiced it regularly as evidenced by Paul’s letters such as Romans. In Romans 6:3-4 we read, “Have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.” Paul mentions a similar teaching in his letter to the Colossian church (Colossians 2:12).

Most Christian traditions agree that baptism is an integral part of Christianity, but historically the main areas of disagreement revolve around significance, subjects, and style.

Significance. Some Christians see baptism as a sign while others elevate it as regenerative or salvific. The Roman Catholic Church holds strongly that baptism is necessary for salvation.¹ Historically, traditions such as Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Church of England, and Episcopalian also have viewed baptism as regenerative and necessary for salvation. Likewise, the Christian Churches or Churches of Christ hold that baptism of believers is required for salvation. Another school of thought sees baptism as symbolic of the gift of God’s grace received as part of the journey of salvation, observing both infant baptism as well as believer baptism. United Methodists and Presbyterians fall into this camp. Baptists affirm the significance of baptism as symbolic but do not observe infant baptism. Of course, these are generalizations of historical viewpoints regarding baptism, and some churches may not hold to their denomination’s historical roots. But these broad strokes can help us see some of the differences in how various Christian traditions view baptism.

Subjects. Who should be baptized? Those who see baptism with an emphasis on God’s grace and initiative (e.g., Reformed, Lutheran, United Methodist, Presbyterian) believe it is a covenantal sign that

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parents initiate for their children, similar to circumcision in the Old Testament. These denominations and others with similar beliefs practice baptism of infants and children. Baptists and other denominations that arose from the Baptist movements that began in the early 1600s with European separatists teach that those old enough to profess faith in Christ should be baptized as a sign of their faith.

Style. We get the English word for baptism from the Greek word *baptizo*, which Strong's Concordance defines as, "1. to dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge (of vessels sunk) 2. to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to wash one's self, bathe 3. to overwhelm."² So the debate comes regarding whether baptism can be done by sprinkling, dipping, or pouring or whether it requires full immersion. Within these views are subsets of differences concerning the style of baptism. Some argue that only one action is needed while others require three separate motions as a symbol of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Discussions of mode also include whether the person being baptized is dipped or dunked forward or backward.

Certainly, we must acknowledge that some mystery surrounds this ordinance of baptism that Christ commissioned his disciples to undertake. Rather than argue and debate, we can study and seek. What we can know for sure about diving into the waters of baptism is that it helps us remember what Jesus has done for us. He died for us, and through the motions of baptism we identify with His death. Coming up out of the water we remember that Jesus was raised from the dead and that we, too, can now live new lives (Romans 6:4).

Notes

1. Merrill F. Unger. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 143.
2. *Baptizo*, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/baptizo.html>. Accessed July 15, 2019.