

Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc.

1789 Iglehart Ave St. Paul, MN 55104-5215 www.dtminc.org Ph. (651) 283-0568

Why Baptism?

by Dan Trygg

“Therefore, going-about ‘disciple-ize’ all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all things whatsoever I commanded to you; and behold I am with you all the days until the finishing-together of the age.”

Matthew 28:19,20

If you have been around churches or church people much, you probably have a layer of religious gobbledy-gook that has been slathered over your perception of biblical events, ideas and practices that keeps you from seeing clearly what was really meant by what the Bible is saying. One of these practices is that of baptism. Most of us have some image or notion that comes to our mind, or, if we are truly “unchurched”, we may have no idea at all what the word means, but we think of it as some kind of religious ritual. In either case, we would be missing the most obvious connection that NT people would have had. For them, the word, *baptizō*, was a common, functional, everyday word, used in several different contexts. For us, it is disconnected from everyday life, a term reserved only for “religious stuff”. Unfortunately, this disconnect also removes the term, and the practice, from any relationship to anything in our everyday lives, and we miss not only the method, but also the implications and connections which would have immediately come to mind for the NT listeners. So, in order to attempt to understand what is going on here, we need to recognize this about ourselves, and work to try to grasp the common perception of this term in the mind of NT people.

First, the word, *baptō*, or *baptizō*, meant to immerse, dip, plunge or whelm. It was used in any context to describe those actions. In the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew OT, it was used in Ex. 12:22 to describe how the Israelites were to take hyssop and *dip* it in the blood of the Passover lamb and then strike to doorposts and lintel of the house with it. In Lev. 4:6,17; 9:9; 14:16 it describes the priest *dipping* his finger in the blood of a sacrificial animal. In 11:22, it is used to describe the process of cleansing articles in a dead person’s house, saying “it shall be *put in (dipped in) the water*”. In Lev. 14:6,51 it was used for *dipping* objects into the blood of a sacrificial bird, as part of a cleansing ritual. In Num. 19:18, it was used for *dipping* hyssop in water before sprinkling objects and people for cleansing. In Dt. 33:24, it is used to bless Asher by saying, “let him *dip* his foot in oil”. In Josh. 3:15, it describes the immersion of the priest’s feet, as they stepped into the Jordan carrying the ark. In Ruth 2:14, it describes *dipping* food in a sauce. In I Sam. 14:27, Jonathan *dipped* the end of his staff into a honeycomb. Naaman the Syrian *dipped* himself in the Jordan seven times in II Kg. 5:14. Hazael the Syrian *dipped* a cloth in water, so that it would be more effective for suffocating Ben Hadad (II Kg. 8:15). In Psa. 68:23 it describes God defeating His enemies by saying, “You shall *dip* your foot in blood”. In Isa. 21:4, the word is used to describe how horror *overwhelmed* him. In the NT, it is used for the washing of hands by *dipping* (Mk. 7:4; Lk. 11:48); the washing of dishes by *immersing* in water (Mk. 7:4), the *dipping* of one’s finger in water (Lk. 16:24); the *dipping* of food in a sauce (Jn. 13:26); and the *dipping* of a robe in blood (Rev. 19:13). The only other uses in the NT are of the baptism (*dipping* or *immersion*) of people. The point of this word study is to demonstrate that what was done when someone was baptized was to immerse or dip them in the water. There were other words available to describe sprinkling. They are *never* used in reference to this act. In spite of what has arisen in church history since the days of the NT, any other method than *dipping* was nonsensical. You would not use the word, *baptize*, to describe sprinkling. That would be to say you *dipped* someone, when you really only sprinkled a little water on them. What? Why not *say* that you sprinkled them, if that is what you meant? Why use the word, *dip*, if that is not what you intended to say?

Second, aside from the method, the natural associations with being *dipped* or *immersed* in water would have been clear to everyone. When did you dip anyone or anything in a liquid?

(a.) When you wanted to bathe or cleanse something. So, one significant part of what was implied by baptism was a cleansing, a washing, a removal of past impurity and making someone clean. This is implied by Luke in his description of John’s ministry, “...he came... preaching a baptism (immersion, dipping, cleansing) of repentance towards the forgiveness (lit. ‘sending away’ or ‘release’) of sins. The same language was used in the

early church preaching (Acts 2:38). The association is even more directly stated by Ananias to the newly converted Saul in Acts 22:16, “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” This was not a new concept. The sect of Essenes at nearby Qumran were known for using ritual bathing as a symbolic way of cleansing themselves, usually several times a day. Does that mean that they, or that the early Christians, believed that the baptism itself really “washed away their sins”? No. Peter states quite eloquently how baptism fits into the grace-faith-forgiveness scenario in I Pet. 3:21, “Corresponding to that (i.e., the way in which Noah and his family were ‘brought safely through the water’ of the flood by their obedience), baptism now saves you – not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience (or, an answer to God from a good conscience) – by means of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” So, if there is a cleansing element to baptism, it is not the bath in itself that cleanses the soul, it is what the bath represents, the appeal or answer of the heart to God in faith.

(b.) When you wanted to permanently mark something. The other major area where the word, *baptizō*, was used in the NT world was in the cloth dyeing industry. There were different methods for coloring cloth or leathers. One could rub a pigment on the surface, imprint or paint it over the cloth or hide, or, alternatively, a person could make a garment of different colored threads or yarns. If you wanted to totally and permanently transform the color of an entire piece of cloth or leather, however, then immersing it in a vat of dye was the method of choice. When dipped, the pigments actually became infused into the material being dyed, and it was permanently changed. The color could not be scraped off, or totally bleached out, because it had gone beneath the surface and had actually become one with the material. The word picture of the phrase, “baptize into the name of Jesus Christ” would have drawn upon this image of baptism. To the first century believer, it would have meant permanently identifying with, and becoming the property of, Jesus the King. It would have implied a transformation that went below the surface, leaving a permanent “Jesus mark” on the person’s life. This is an important concept to grasp when attempting to understand baptism. It was meant to be an outward demonstration signifying the permanence of becoming one with Jesus. It was an experience that not only cemented one’s faith in a time/space historical event that was external and definite, but one that also was meant to emphasize the permanence of being “dipped into the name of Jesus”. The point was to mark this faith commitment in one’s own memory in order to prevent the enemy from muddying one’s mind with questions about, “Did I ever really make a commitment?” or, “Did I believe ‘good-enough’?” If you understood and trusted in Jesus enough to get wet in a baptism, then your faith was more than a mere passing idea. You were definitely willing to “take the plunge”, as they say. Also, although the water may be invisible, and will dry off, the notion of baptism is that you are marked forever spiritually with the mark of God (cf. II Cor. 1:21,22; Eph. 4:30), another important concept to help us battle “the doubts”. I am convinced that to the spiritual world this is very visible, even if not so to human eyes.

Third, there is one other aspect to baptism that is essential to understand. In the Jewish world of the NT, **gentile converts to Judaism were dipped in water as not only a sign of cleansing, but also as a consecration.** Not only were they cleansed and separated from the sinful behaviors of their old life, **they also entered upon a new life and became part of a new community, the people of God. This speaks of consecration, a new identity and a dedication to God which did not exist before.** This has huge ramifications for our understanding of the significance of John’s preaching, Jesus’ own baptism, as well as the Christian baptism which Jesus commanded us to continue to do (Mt. 28:18-20).

When **John** showed up in the wilderness (Lk. 3:1-18), telling Jews that the Kingdom of God was nearly here, and that they needed to get ready for the King’s coming, he **preached a “baptism of repentance”, or “repentance’s baptism”.** Part of what he was getting at was the need for cleansing from old sin, but more importantly, **he was calling people to “view things differently” and choose to live as ones dedicated to God.** It was a call to a renewed consecration. By using the common practice of gentile baptism, he was making the Jews see that their self-produced righteousness was “as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6), and they needed to start out fresh, just like a new convert. The more “righteous” of them liked to think that they were special because they were “sons of Abraham”. John put them in their place by saying that God could make sons of Abraham from the stones on the ground. It wasn’t about race, or heritage. At the heart of the issue was not just their unclean behavior, but a misalignment of the heart. They needed to become yielded subjects to the King, whose Kingdom was quickly coming.

This was why Jesus came to be baptized (Mt. 3:13-17). He had no sin, so He did not need to be “cleansed”. What He came to John for was to submit to an act that symbolized a death to His old life as a carpenter in Nazareth, and a new consecration as God’s Man, ...God’s Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. **Jesus’ baptism was the dividing line between His private life of preparation and His public life of dedicated service** (Mt. 4:1-17). It was time to get busy. It was time to step outside what was comfortable and familiar into what was a totally new arena for Him. He had to trust God in a fresh way, and was committed to a new path, ...one that He knew He was called to long before, but now it was time to set out on. Jesus identified with humanity by laying down His life humbly before His Father in baptism, just as we are called to do. In this, He identified with us, and modeled for us the way of consecration to God.

Paul expands on this in Romans 6:3-5 by likening the “immersion” of baptism to a “burial”. “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the *likeness* of His death (i.e., a burial), certainly we shall also be in the *likeness* of His resurrection.” **Baptism is not only the appeal to God for cleansing from sin, it is also a dramatic identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as a laying down of one’s self in order to devote oneself to God.** It is the expression of a new orientation, a new perception of what life is all about. It is embracing the need for God’s grace in Jesus, as well as a commitment to serve Him with one’s entire being. **It is also claiming a new identity as one of the King’s blood-bought, cleansed and set-apart-from-everyday-life servants.**

Finally, the culminating event in Jesus’ baptism was the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Him, and the voice of the Father from Heaven. This was meant to be a sign to John the Baptist that He was indeed the Messiah, the One who would come after him. This was the way God indicated that He was going to reveal to John who this person was. John saw the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, and thus began testifying that Jesus is the Son of God, a Messianic title meaning that He is the King of Israel (Jn. 1:29-34). As a result of John’s testimony, the way for Jesus was prepared and he received His first disciples (Jn. 1:35f.). What I desire to bring to your attention however is the prophecy that **Jesus would be “the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit”.** This was the focus of Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church for the first time. Peter’s invitation to the listeners was “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:38,39). The gift of the Holy Spirit is vital to what being a Christian is all about. It is He that enables us to do what we are called to do for God (Acts 1:8; I Cor. 12-14). And it is He who is given to confirm to us that we are God’s children (Rom. 8:15,16). **Baptism is a consecration to a new life, a life of service to God. The gift of the Spirit is the equipment to live out that life. Consecration, affirmation from on high and empowerment from within are meant to go together at baptism.**

Unfortunately, we have gotten away from baptizing people immediately upon their conversion. At the time of the NT, this was the normative experience. Belief was immediately followed by baptism (Acts 22:16). Belief, being born-again, baptism, experiencing the Holy Spirit all went together in most peoples’ experience. They all combined to make up one’s “salvation experience”. Thus, it was perfectly acceptable to speak of one aspect of that cluster of events as a reference to the whole process. In church history, however, this has been misunderstood, and weird teachings have been the result. Some think you have to be baptized in order to be saved. If that were true, Paul would not have been able to say, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (I Cor. 1:17). Baptism is meant to be a demonstration and outward expression of the salvation experience, not a condition of it. You don’t “have to” get baptized to be a Christian, but, once you understand that baptism is something Jesus wants us to do, why wouldn’t you choose to be baptized out of obedience and deference to Him? The “have to” mentality comes at the question all wrong. The question should be, “What does Jesus *want*?” He made it quite clear that baptism is something He expects of those who would be His followers (Mt. 28:19), so if you are serious about Jesus, it would seem that this would be a priority for you. Also, the fact that the early church did this immediately to new converts indicates that we should not put this off until we are “ready”, or until we “understand more clearly”. “Arise and get yourself baptized” (Acts 22:16).