

Study Guide #10: Christian Baptism

Introduction

What's the purpose of Christian baptism? Is it really necessary to be baptized? Should infants be baptized, or is it only for adults? What is the proper method of baptism? Is rebaptism ever permissible? Can others be baptized on behalf of deceased relatives or friends? These are the chief questions we examine in this Study Guide.

Question #1: What is the purpose or significance of Christian baptism?

Answer: According to Romans 6:4, baptism symbolizes a person being **“buried with Him [Jesus] through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”** (NKJV). In other words, baptism symbolizes the person's identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection—all in the spiritual sense. It also symbolizes the washing away of one's sins (Acts 22:16). *Second*, baptism is **“into Christ”** (Romans 6:3, NKJV; cf. Galatians 3:27). Since Jesus is the spiritual husband to His Church (Ephesians 5:23-27; II Corinthians 11:2), and baptism is a formal and usually public ceremony, then it's a kind of spiritual wedding ceremony in which the believer “marries” Jesus. It is thus the *official* beginning of his relationship with Jesus. *Third*, baptism is the means by which a person becomes a member of the Church. We are **“baptized into one body...”**, defined as the Church (I Corinthians 12:13, NKJV; cf. vv. 27-28). Therefore, the idea that there should be an initial baptism into Christ and a later baptism into the Church is not Biblical, because to be baptized into Jesus, who is the Head of the church, is to be baptized into the Church at the same time. *Finally*, baptism results in receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit in a special way (Acts 2:38). [NOTE: It's true that on one occasion in the New Testament the Holy Spirit was given *before* baptism (Acts 10:47) and in one case *after* baptism (Acts 8:14-17). But the general rule is that this gift is associated with baptism.]



A Baptism

Question #2: Does the baptismal water wash away a person's sins?

Answer: This question asks whether baptism itself is God's *method* for actually cleansing sins or whether it's an important *symbol* of that cleansing. In technical terms, that's the difference between a (a) sacrament and an (b) ordinance, with the former as the *means* of grace and the latter as the *symbol* of grace. Acts 2:38 is used by some to support the sacramental nature of baptism: **“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins...”** (NKJV). I Peter 3:20-21 compares Noah's ark to baptism by declaring that baptism **“now saves us”** (v. 21, NKJV). But verse 21 makes clear that it's not the literal act of baptism that saves a person, for it reads, **“baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God)...”** (NKJV). The

Greek word for “**answer**” was used by ancient Greeks in a legal sense. Thus, Peter is declaring that the act of baptism constitutes a legal appeal to God of a good conscience against sin. In other words, it’s the *attitude*, not the literal act of being baptized, that enables God to save us. Therefore, we conclude that baptism is not a sacrament in the traditional sense of that word. Rather, it’s an important ordinance that symbolizes a person’s positive response to God in moving away from a willful sinful life.

Question #3: Is baptism absolutely necessary in order to be saved?

Answer: In John 3:5, Jesus told us that “**unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God**” (NKJV). The reference to “**water**” here refers to baptism because Acts 2:38 teaches that baptism is accompanied by the reception of the Holy Spirit, who comes from above in heaven. This statement makes baptism of great importance. However, there are exceptions to the rule that one must be baptized in order go to heaven. For example, Jesus promised one of the thieves on a cross next to Him that he would be in Paradise with Him (Luke 23:42-43). The thief had no time to be baptized, implying that baptism is necessary only when physically possible. On this basis, the severely handicapped and the severely ill may be exempt from baptism and yet still be saved. After all, there is no Biblical support for the idea that there’s anything holy or magical about the water used in baptism (see Question #2).

Question #4: Is it appropriate to baptize infants?

Answer: Several Christian churches practice infant baptism on various grounds. But none of the reasons given to support this practice actually represents solid proof for doing this. By contrast, there’s good evidence that implicitly means that infant baptism should *not* be performed. The most important evidence is that baptism requires (1) repentance to precede baptism (Acts 2:38: “**Repent...and be baptized...**”, NKJV), and (2) one must become a “disciple” (“follower”) of Jesus first: “**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them...**” (Matthew 28:19, NKJV). Repentance and discipleship require a deliberate, knowledgeable decision on the part of the person being baptized. Infants cannot make those decisions. On the other hand, baptism doesn’t have to be only for adults. Many young people are capable of sufficient understanding, belief, and making a commitment to Jesus. Since young people mature at different ages, there is no one minimum age that can be required for baptism.



Infant Baptism?

Question #5: How should a person be baptized? Does it make any difference what method is used for baptism?

Answer: Although some independent Christian groups use a variety of materials with which to baptize someone, most use water, as required by the New Testament. There are 3 different modes (methods) of water baptism that different churches use: (1) immersion; (2) aspersion (sprinkling); and (3) affusion (pouring). Although Church history and the archaeology of ancient church buildings both confirm that the original mode of baptism was by immersion, the practices of sprinkling and pouring were gradually adopted by the Western Church because it was perceived to be more “convenient.”

First, the Greek word for “baptism” means that which is “immersed or dipped under” something. The word was used in secular contexts to refer to the process of dyeing cloth, which was dipped under (or baptized) the liquid dye. *Second*, the New Testament describes baptism as symbolizing one’s death to the old sinful way of life, burial of that way of life, and resurrection (new birth) to a new way of life (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:12). Only baptism by immersion symbolizes this theological meaning. *Third*, references to “**much water**” in the Jordan River where John the Baptist baptized people (John 3:23, NKJV) and the descriptions of a baptized person coming up out of the water (Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:38-39) all point to baptism by immersion. Therefore, we conclude that any other form of “baptism” is not really baptism.

Question #6: Should a person be immersed three times, once for each member of the Trinity?

Answer: This practice is called triple (or trine) immersion and is based on Matthew 28:19’s statement that people should be baptized “**in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**” (NKJV). *First*, other New Testament texts simply refer to being baptized in the name of “**Jesus**” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 19:5) or in the name of the “**Lord**” (Acts 10:48). Therefore, there doesn’t appear to be a precise formula to be recited at a person’s baptism. *Second*, note that the word “**name**” in Matthew 28:19 occurs only once and it’s singular. This means that all 3 members of the Trinity constitute the one name in which people are baptized. Thus, there’s no support for triple immersion. Triple immersion would then constitute 3 baptisms.



Trine Immersion

Question #7: Why do some churches require a person to accept certain specific doctrines of the church before baptizing him? If a person accepts Jesus, aren’t they then ready for baptism?

Answer: *First*, a person needs to be a disciple (follower) of Jesus before he can be baptized (Matthew 28:19). This naturally requires some level of knowledge of Him and His teachings in order to make a meaningful commitment to Him. *Second*, because baptism is the door to Church membership (see Question #1), it’s implied that a person should have sufficient knowledge to understand what he’s getting into, especially since there are so many different churches teaching different things today. Of course, more learning also follows baptism (Matthew 28:19-20). In the New Testament, most of those baptized into the Church were already God-fearers and would only need to learn and accept that Jesus was the promised Messiah and Son of God.

Question #8: If we can come to Jesus just the way we are, then why does a person have to overcome sins before being baptized?

Answer: Remember that there’s a difference between being a sinner in continual need of God’s grace and being a *practitioner* of known sin. John the Baptist required people to repent of their sins before being baptized (Matthew 3:7-11; Luke 3:7-14). The Greek word for “repent” implies a change in heart or

purpose—a corresponding change in the spiritual direction. Peter echoed John the Baptist when he called on people to first repent and then be baptized (Acts 2:38). If a person is walking in a known sin, he needs to stop practicing that sin. Such repentance demonstrates their willingness to turn away from sin before they formalize their relationship with Jesus in baptism. On the other hand, everyone struggles with sin of one sort or another, so it can't be a prerequisite for all spiritual struggle to end before being baptized.



Question #9: Is it ever appropriate for a person to be baptized a second time?

Answer: Yes, rebaptism can be appropriate under the right circumstances. In Acts 19:1-6, Paul met a group of people who had been baptized by John the Baptist but had never heard of the Holy Spirit. After they learned this new truth, Paul baptized them. Therefore, even for Christians who have been Biblically baptized, if they learn significantly new truths, they may be rebaptized. We can't say, however, that rebaptism should be required. The other circumstance in which rebaptism would be acceptable—but again, not required—is if a Christian has so wandered from Jesus that he has effectively “divorced” Him. While an occasional falling into sin is always dangerous, it does not itself constitute a “divorce” from Jesus any more than an occasional fight with one's spouse constitutes a divorce. So one must be careful not to insist on several repeated baptisms. Naturally, if a believer had never been baptized *Biblically*—that is by immersion after knowing what he was doing—in that case, baptism would not actually be a rebaptism.

Question #10: May a believer be baptized on behalf of a deceased relative or friend?

Answer: The idea that someone may be baptized on behalf of a dead loved one or friend in order to get that person into heaven is not a Biblical concept. As already shown in this Study Guide, a person about to be baptized must repent and make a knowledgeable commitment to Jesus. There is no second chance after death. Jesus made that abundantly clear in His Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, when He declared, **“Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented”** (Luke 16:25, NKJV).

The New Testament text used to support the practice of being baptized on behalf of the dead is I Corinthians 15:29: **“Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead”** (NKJV)? Some are troubled by the fact that Paul didn't condemn the practice. But this text is part of a much larger passage discussing the idea of a final resurrection of the dead. This is probably the reason he didn't stop to comment on the practice either way. All we know is that Paul wasn't condoning the practice of being baptized for the dead because baptism requires personal belief and commitment. To build an entire doctrine on one obscure text is not sound theology.