

Why Baptism ?

Foreword

Most Christians believe baptism to be important but see the rite in different ways. The majority of churches teach infant baptism but others prefer adult baptism as we see practiced in the New Testament and we understand this adult baptism to be “the answer of a good conscience towards God.” (1 Peter 3:21)

In this article we confine ourselves to Bible teaching showing the origins of this practice; why it was introduced and how it saves us

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## Baptism - and The New Covenant

### **John's Baptism for the remission of sins**

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light” (John 1:6).

This introduces to us John the Baptist who was baptising in Jordan because there was much water there. Now John's baptism was the “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” and was for the Jews only - those who were already in covenant relationship with God through being under the Law of Moses, and many Jews came to John confessing their sins and were baptised by him.

At this time John made a public proclamation to the people, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand”, or, as we read in the Emphatic Diaglott, “Reform! because the Royal Majesty of the Heavens has approached.” (Matthew 3:2).

When John saw Jesus coming to him he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, after me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water” (John 1:29-31).

But John was hesitant to baptise Jesus “and forbade him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said to him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:14,15).

When Jesus submitted to the Baptism of John He had no sins to confess, nor any defilement from which to be cleansed, but by it He typified His own death, burial and resurrection and His baptism was an act of consecration and dedication prior to His work of preaching the gospel and then, taking away the sin of the world by the free-will sacrifice – the laying down of His own life.

Perhaps we could draw a parallel or a similarity between the Passover Lamb being set aside three days before the Passover with Jesus' baptism three years before He gave Himself as the sacrifice for the sin of the world. (Matthew 26:2). “For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

### **Ye must be born again**

We find that early on in Jesus' preaching, a ruler of the Jews, named Nicodemus, came to Him one night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:1-6).

Here we see Jesus also preaching baptism as a new birth, or being born again, and His disciples baptised more people than John, as John had said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30 and John 4:1,2).

But let us go on ahead to the time when Jesus had finished preaching to the nation of Israel and at the last supper, the day before He was crucified, He took the bread and said “This is my body which is given for you” and then the wine about which He said “This is my blood which is shed for you” and thus established the New Covenant. Then later that night well knowing that He was going to be crucified the next morning, He prayed to His Father saying, “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do...” (John 17:4). The work which God had given Him was now complete but Jesus knew the need for one more supreme work which only He could accomplish and this He chose to do –

the greatest act of love that any man has ever done and only Jesus was in the position to do it - to give His life a ransom for many. "Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13,14). We do well to stop for a while and think on this and appreciated just what Jesus did for us.

At the end of the forty days after His resurrection and before His ascension into heaven Jesus told His disciples that they were to go into all the world and preach the gospel, and that "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). And so it was that the eleven apostles, having all things brought to their remembrance, whatsoever Jesus had said to them, and having their understanding opened, were renewed and strengthened and responded according to their faith.

### **Baptism into Jesus Christ**

We now find the Baptism the Apostles preached and practised was into the death of Jesus (Romans 6:3), which was very different to the baptism preached by John in two outstanding and very important aspects. First, we saw how John's baptism was for those who were already in covenant relationship with God through being under the Law of Moses; however, this old covenant relationship was ended with Jesus crucifixion when the veil in the Temple was miraculously torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51) the moment Jesus died on the cross. We see that Jesus had fulfilled the Law of Moses and, being ended, there was no longer a covenant under that Law nor were any of its rituals and ordinances of any value to those who continued to observe them. From the time of the resurrection of Jesus there was a New Covenant established and all those who would come to God had to come into the new covenant relationship with Him through Jesus Christ by baptism into His death and this new covenant was extended beyond Israel to all the world, to as many as were and are called and chose to accept it.

### **Two Greek words for 'life'**

The second aspect is seen when Jesus said, "Ye must be born again." He was speaking of a new life – a spirit life – in the new relationship with Him. "Born of water and of the Spirit." All of the human race has received natural life passed down throughout all generations from Adam with the exception of Jesus who was born of a virgin but received His life direct from His Father and not from Adam.

There are two distinct words used in the Greek language for 'life' and they are 'psuche' for our natural life passed down from Adam, and 'zoe' for the spirit life which leads to eternal life which we receive from God when we are 'born again'. Whenever we read of eternal life throughout the New Testament we find that the Greek word 'psuche' is never used but 'zoe' is used exclusively. It is unfortunate that this important distinction is lost in the English translation.

And so at baptism we receive a new life – our 'zoe', or spirit life. When Jesus said, "I am come that they may have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10), he used the term 'zoe' thus showing that we have been given spirit life now, along with our 'psuche' or natural life, and that we might have it (zoe) more abundantly at His return and the resurrection, when the faithful receive eternal life and their natural life is no longer required.

### **Sacrifices for sin – from Eden to Gethsemane.**

Let us now turn briefly to the subject of sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament. In the Garden of Eden Adam was told that he should not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil "for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). When Adam and Eve broke this commandment they were liable to the consequence of breaking the law, but God in His mercy spared their lives, and the first animal sacrifice was slain in their stead to provide them a covering for their sin.

We believe Cain and Abel were also instructed in sacrifices for Abel's sacrifice was acceptable but Cain's was not (Genesis 4:5). Later the ordinances and commandments under the Law of Moses gave further instruction explaining the need for sacrifices for forgiveness for those in covenant relationship with their Creator.

The fundamental idea of sacrifice in the Old Testament is that of substitution, the life of the sacrifice, which is in the blood, for the life of the sacrificer. It was sanctioned by God Himself and is expressed in terms of covering over with the substituted life being accepted by God in the place of the life of the offerer. Hence the Scriptural practice: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity" (Psalm 32:1,2).

Such sacrifices, however, necessarily pointed to a priesthood to mediate for the people and such a priesthood needed cleansing before they could offer cleansing for the worshippers to bring them near to God and keep in fellowship with Him. Also these priests under the Law of Moses continually changed and the priests and services needed purification and their sacrifices required constant renewal.

There was one sacrifice which founded the Law of Moses and which needed no renewal. We read of this in Exodus 24:3-8, "And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the LORD hath said will we do. And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he

sprinkled on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words.”

Likewise there is one sacrifice which instituted the law of love of the New Covenant. This time it was a perfect sacrifice and it completed the work of salvation, for the blood of bulls and of goats had only covered over sin and could not take it away (Hebrews 10:4) because the life of the animal was not a true substitute for the life of man that was lost by Adam. However, the blood, in which was the life (psuche), of Jesus was the exact equivalent to the life Adam forfeited in Eden.

All this showed man’s need and God’s merciful kindness. Hence Jesus, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world, and who on a perfect altar brought a perfect sacrifice, once for all - a perfect Substitute and a perfect Mediator. (Hebrews 10:1-24). “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:19).

Hebrews 10:28, “He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?”

Our baptism then, is the answer of a good conscience towards God, by a complete immersion in water representing our death with Jesus, then arising out of the water to newness of life in Him; a re-birth in Jesus Christ. And to those baptised into Jesus, Paul exhorts, “If ye then be risen (from the water of baptism) with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4).

Russell Gregory