

**A**  
**BAPTISM**  
**WORTH TALKING ABOUT**

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# **C O N T E N T S**

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**IS BAPTISM  
WORTH TALKING  
ABOUT?**

The short answer is “yes.” The most obvious reason is that God originated baptism and carried its message throughout the New Testament. But that short answer needs developing. We’re not to read the Bible as if God said: “I’ve spoken, so just shut up and do what I say!” That’s not the tone at all. While we’re called to be obedient, we’re not called to grovel. He isn’t that kind of God.

In addition, it’s clear that all God’s commands and truths relate to life with Him and the richness of that life. God doesn’t just think up commands for us to obey so He can show that He’s the boss. They aren’t hoops we must jump through if we want to be saved. The commands come from a holy Father who has created us to live with one another in joy and peace—not from some self-obsessed megalomaniac (Philippians 2:5-7).

### **Should We Make a Fuss About Baptism?**

Several things need to be kept clearly in mind. One is that baptism wasn’t invented by modern believers. Ignoring for the moment some distinctions that need to be remembered, we need to recall that Jesus Himself was baptized (Matthew 3:13-18; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21, 22). In His ministry He baptized thousands, although He had His disciples doing the actual baptizing (Matthew 3:5, 6; John 4:1, 2). Nothing Jesus ever engaged in is to be dismissed as unimportant. Before He returned to His Father, He sent the apostles into the entire world with the command to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). The fact that Jesus practiced baptism and then commanded it for all nations should be enough for us to accept it with utmost seriousness.

## **Does Baptism Deflect Us from the Major Issues?**

Doesn't making a major issue out of baptism sound strange in a world that's filled with wars, hunger, disease, and desperation? Shouldn't we be talking about things more to the point—things more central to the needs of the world?

I've heard non-believers say the same thing about the preaching of forgiveness of sins, eternal life and a home in heaven. For generations they've been saying, "Let's have less talk about mansions in glory for the faithful and more about homes here on earth for the impoverished and oppressed." Many believers think that talking about baptism is a waste of time and energy and that spending time on church ordinances deflects us from the real issues.

Perhaps, but we need to remember that one night when the world was just as filled with wars, hunger and disease as it is now, the Savior took 12 men aside in an upper room and engaged in a church ordinance and transformed it into a communion called the Lord's Supper. It isn't wise to become more pious than Jesus. If He thought a church ordinance was important enough for Him to engage in and give as a gift to His church, it should be given serious consideration. Of course, it isn't that we have to choose between practical involvement in peoples' lives and attending to ordinances like baptism and the Lord's Supper. We ought to pay attention to both. We need to remember that baptism is no more inward looking than the Lord's Supper. They point beyond the worshiper to profound and world-shaping truths.

Teaching and doing compassionate and honorable deeds out of a sincere heart doesn't give us the liberty to refuse to do and teach other things that God has laid on us. We must carefully consider Matthew 5:19. We need to remember the God-loving and God-fearing Cornelius. He was commanded to be baptized even after God had publicly

approved of him in numerous ways and sent the Holy Spirit upon him (Acts 10:23b-48).

If we arrogate to ourselves the liberty to ignore any command of God or knowingly teach and influence others to do this, we give ourselves the right of judgment over them all. This is precisely the point of James 2:10, 11. It isn't for us to pick and choose what we will take seriously and what we will obey and teach.

Some may say, "But if a person has true faith in Jesus why should we bother him about baptism—isn't faith the central calling that God makes on people?" If a person has true faith we wouldn't be bothering him to talk about it. He would want us to talk to him about it and would think we had been robbing him if he later came to know we consciously withheld it. Certainly, faith that works on the basis of covenant love to Christ (Galatians 5:6) is the central emphasis in the New Testament; but the content and expression of New Testament faith is shaped by the New Testament itself. For example, James who passionately insisted on justification by faith in Jesus refused to recognize faith as true faith if it wouldn't fulfill what God has plainly called for (James 2:1-12, 14-26; 1 John 3:17). What faith cannot do and still call itself faith is refuse God's call without apology or conscience.

Baptism isn't only about the believer. It concerns God's gospel proclamation in the presence of the entire human family.

### **The New Testament Doesn't Make "a Fuss" of Baptism**

Let's be clear about this: To teach and practice New Testament baptism is not the same as "making a fuss" of it. It is obedience to the will of God, and He doesn't make a fuss about anything.

It seems to me that it's the people who refuse to teach and make a practice of baptism who make the fuss. No one in the New Testament

ever denied the truth that believers needed to be baptized, and no one ever tried to prove that they had to be. There was no fuss about it. They argued about all kinds of things, but they never argued about believers having to be baptized into Christ.

The fact that the New Testament doesn't make a fuss about baptism is what should strike us with great force. In the New Testament no one argued about it. They obeyed it without question and took it for granted that everyone was baptized. Notice that assumption in places like Romans 6:3-5. Many texts like that led scholars like Beasley-Murray and Schnackenburg to say that limiting baptism by saying it wasn't required at all times for all people "is unknown to Paul. To him it is for every man the regular means of becoming a Christian" (Believer's Baptism, p. 68). You simply can't read the New Testament and think baptism is a trivial issue. No one in the New Testament dreams of saying anything like, "Oh dear, more talk about church ordinances when the world is starving and lost. What a pity we have to descend to trivial issues." The New Testament shows that baptism is a very significant matter, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. Neither should we intentionally give others the impression that we think it is unimportant or trivial.

### **The New Testament Takes Baptism for Granted**

Let me repeat this also: No one in the New Testament ever tries to prove anything about baptism; they simply call for it and those who want Jesus as Lord just as simply obey it. When thousands wanted to be right with God in Christ they were told to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And not only did they do it without argument—they did it "gladly" (Acts 2:37-41).

After God spoke to Saul in the great light, He sent him to Ananias

for further instructions. Ananias told him, “The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on [God’s] name” (Acts 22:14-16). Neither Peter, Ananias nor Paul was attempting to prove anything about baptism. And the people who obeyed didn’t ask, “Do I have to be baptized?”

All this debating business is a modern thing that developed out of Catholic—Protestant and then inter-Protestant controversy. You don’t find a breath of it in the New Testament. And no one in the New Testament is reluctant to bring up baptism to those who want to be saved in Jesus. In the New Testament everyone just blurts it out, and people submit to it without a moment’s hesitation.

Today, many people don’t want to mention it. It’s like introducing the topic of your crazy uncle Charlie at a fancy dinner of aristocratic intellectuals. Nothing like this happens in the New Testament. No one’s embarrassed by the subject—Christian or non-Christian. A pagan jailer and his family were baptized in the middle of the night (Acts 16:27-33). A high-ranking diplomat traveling through a desert area insists that a stranger baptize him then and there. He goes back home “rejoicing” from finding full acceptance in Jesus (8:27-39). Peter challenges anyone to deny a Gentile household the right to be baptized, insisting that it was their God-given privilege as faith’s way of coming under the saving name of Jesus (4:12; 10:47, 48).

If there ever was a time in the New Testament when a “fuss” was made of baptism, it was in that incident when some would have doubted the right of uncircumcised Gentiles to be allowed salvation in Jesus Christ (Acts 10; 11:1-18; 15). Peter, in essence, said of this Gentile family,

“In light of all this, is there any one of you prepared to deny these people the right to be baptized?” You hear people today saying, “Believers don’t need to be baptized” or “I won’t be baptized.” Nothing like that ever happens in the New Testament. As Beasley-Murray and others insist, it is inconceivable that it would have happened.

We’re not to make more (or less) of baptism than the New Testament does. It’s no substitute for God, and it’s not the end-all of our response to God. But the short and the long answer to the “Is baptism worth talking about?” question is “yes.”