



Life Principles Notes™

Baptism: Option or Obligation?

Summary:

The Bible leaves us no option to pick and choose from among its commands. Baptism, for example, is not simply a possibility for us to accept or reject. It is a spiritual obligation for every believer, and an awesome privilege as well. In the act of baptism, a believer makes a public confession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a message to the world that from now on we intend to follow Christ.

After the time of Pentecost, a Christian named Philip had a conversation with a man

from Ethiopia. Philip told his new friend the good news about Jesus Christ. Eventually the Ethiopian said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36) Philip replied that if his friend believed with all his heart, he could be baptized.

This passage from God’s Word raises several important questions about the practice of baptism.

Key Passage: [Acts 8:26-39](#)

Supporting Scripture: *Acts 16:31-34; John 4:1-2; Ephesians 2:8-9; Acts 2:37-38; John 3:1-6; Mark, 16:12-16.*

Scriptural Principles:

1 Who should be baptized?

Some might assume that anyone who wants to be a church member should be baptized. This is the wrong answer, however. According to the Scriptures, only those who believe in Jesus Christ should be baptized. We need to be careful with the word “belief,” however. When we say that we believe in Christ, we are stating more than mental affirmation of His existence. The Bible’s idea of “believe” involves action. If we believe in Jesus, we do something about it: we confess, repent, and live in a new way. Philip told his Ethiopian friend that baptism was available if the man believed with all his heart. (Acts 8:37) In Acts 16:31-34, Paul and Silas baptized a whole household after the family began to believe in Christ. Only an individual capable of placing his or her faith in Christ is eligible before God to be baptized.

2 What is the proper method of baptism?

Christians throughout the world recognize three methods of baptism. The first of these involves the pouring of water, generally over the head of the new believer. The second involves sprinkling the water. The final version of baptism is full immersion into the water. Our word for baptism comes from the Greek word which was used to describe such things as ships sinking. The Greek words for “pour” and “sprinkle” are never used in the New Testament in reference to baptism. We baptize by immersion simply because that procedure fulfills the most precise understanding of the command of Jesus in the Bible.

3 What is the meaning of baptism?

Baptism is symbolic. The procedure of momentarily being immersed and being lifted, presents a simple picture of the actions of Jesus Himself. He was killed, buried, and resurrected from death. When we trust Him as our Savior, we die to the old life, and raise to walk in newness of life. Baptism shows how the

“old” has been buried, and how the new has risen from the depths. It also suggests that one day we will rise from death itself, to live eternally in heaven.

4 What is the proper time for baptism?

At Pentecost, when three thousand people were saved after Peter’s sermon, there was immediate baptism for these new believers. Philip’s Ethiopian friend was baptized without delay as well. We see from many accounts in Scripture that the time for baptism is immediately after conversion. When we procrastinate in following this command, we break the commitment we have made to follow Christ. Why was Jesus baptized? He asked John to baptize Him as a way of identifying with sinful humanity. We seek baptism because we are following Him in obedience, and that obedience should never be delayed.

5 Who can baptize?

In the New Testament, it was the disciples who baptized new believers. (John 4:1-2) Philip baptized the Ethiopian, and Peter and his fellow apostles baptized thousands of converts at Pentecost. John 4 mentions that Jesus Himself did not baptize. We also know that in the New Testament church, pastors baptized new believers. The pattern from Scripture, then, is that this Christian practice is the duty of the pastor. Is it possible for anyone other than a minister of the Gospel to perform a baptism? The answer is that yes, in certain instances, a godly, Bible-believing person can perform baptism. The wisest policy, however, is for baptism to be the work of the pastor.

6 What is the relationship of baptism to salvation?

The Word of God does not teach that baptism is a requirement for salvation, nor that the act itself saves us. The clear and consistent teaching of Scripture is that we are saved through the grace of God when we believe in Christ and place our trust in Him. (Ephesians 2:8-9) The thief on the cross beside Jesus was saved without baptism. Salvation precedes baptism and never depends upon it. Baptism is the obedient response to our salvation by Christ. Acts 2:37-38, John 3:1-6, and Mark 16:12-16 are often used to argue for a salvation that comes through baptism, but the context of these passages shows that this is not true.

7 Why should we be baptized?

The first reason we should be baptized is that Jesus commanded us to do so. Second, He was baptized Himself. Jesus loved us enough to identify with us. Why would any believer not want to follow Him into the baptismal waters? Third, baptism is a picture of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior. Fourth, it is also a picture of our experience in salvation—that of dying to the old, sinful self and rising to walk in the new life of the Holy Spirit. Fifth, baptism identifies us with the body of Christ. A church celebrates together the baptism of a member. Finally, baptism declares our faith in a future bodily resurrection. For all these reasons, Christian baptism is a joy, a privilege, and a pleasure for the children of God.

Conclusion:

Isn’t it wonderful to know that our God left us with no serious doubts about how to live? He gave us His Word to guide us into every right and wise action, and He did so because He loves us and knows what is best for us.

The Lord Jesus Christ commands us to follow Him, because He knows that this is our only hope. He commands us to repent, believe on His name, and be saved. Then, immediately upon

becoming His children and heirs to His kingdom, we are commanded to follow Him into the waters of baptism.

As we enter those waters, we experience the joy and freshness of what He has done for us. We live out a beautiful picture of the saving work of Christ, and we live out that picture for the whole world to see. ✝

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