

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (1-5-1994 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Baptism – part 1

Acts 2:41

Additional Bible Reading: Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 2:37-41; 16:26-34

### Introduction

The subject of baptism is mentioned several times in the book of Acts, and so we are going to take a look at what the Bible says on the subject. We start today with preliminary remarks about the ordinances or sacraments; then a look at the history of baptism and its subjects. Next time, to look at the mode, meaning and value.

### What are ordinances or sacraments?

Baptism and the Lord's Supper speak to us of the saving truth of the Gospel. They visibly express the Gospel and confirm it to the believer. They provide a means for us to show we have a share and participate in the Gospel. Preaching is the audible Word. The ordinances are the visible Word. God has clothed the promises of His Word with visible signs.

There are only two sacraments. The Roman Catholics observe seven sacraments, which they say confer grace and produce spiritual life and holiness merely by being performed. The Roman Catholic Church is a Sacramental Institution, not a New Testament fellowship. They would say that baptism washes away the sins of an infant and gives it regeneration and spiritual life.

We say that the sacraments are only signs, though they can be a means of grace and blessing to us. But only if there is personal faith first. The sacraments deepen and strengthen faith, and deepen our sense of union with Christ. When Spurgeon was baptised, he claimed he lost a thousand fears in the river, for he found that in keeping God's commandments there is great reward.

These are church ordinances, not just private ordinances. Baptism is the door into the visible church, the fellowship of believers. We meet around the Table as members of Christ's family. One bread – signifying unity. At baptism, we remember that the Cross is the source of new life. At the Lord's Supper, we remember that the Cross means continuing new life. We are baptised once because we were only once born again and justified. We celebrate the Lord's Supper many times, to give us repeated assurance of forgiveness, and nourishment of our spiritual lives. But both are perpetual – to be done until He comes.

### History of baptism

Baptism did not begin with the Christian church, or even with John the Baptist. Even before those days there was the practice of proselyte baptism for entry into Judaism. John the Baptist baptised as a sign of repentance in preparation for Christ's coming. Jesus was baptised, though He was sinless, because He was identifying Himself with sinners whom He had come to save. Then He went on to make it a command, **Make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son**

**and of the Holy Spirit** (Matthew 28:19). In the Acts of the Apostles we read how the Apostles commenced to carry out this command. And we continue to do so 2000 years later.

Infant baptism was first evident in the writings of Irenaeus, around 180AD. It was contested by Tertulian. By the time of Origen, in the mid-third century, the belief was that infant baptism had originated with the Apostles. From the fifth century, it was common practice. It was part of a growing departure from the New Testament, e.g. also priesthood, externals sacramental grace. Right the way through the Dark and Middle Ages (500-1500) these things dominated the Roman Catholic Church, and infant baptism was the norm.

But there were still a few individuals and groups in different parts of Europe who stressed the need for conversion, believer's baptism and a return to the New Testament. They often paid dearly with their lives. The Reformation in the sixteenth century brought a return to the New Testament – but not in the issue of baptism. Contradiction in Luther – faith for salvation, but not baptism. Anabaptists on the Continent revived believer's baptism, and were resisted by both Roman Catholics and other Protestants. They paid for their convictions with their lives – usually drowning.

There was a return to believer's baptism in England in 1612. The thinking was that if the church was going to insist that only believers could be members of the church, then only believers could take the ordinances – and that included baptism. At the present time, believer's baptism is carried out by Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals, and many independent evangelical churches. In other churches there is much debate – some members and some ministers do accept it.

What about the way baptism is done? The history here too has been varied. There is no neat pattern of believer's baptism by immersion and infant baptism by sprinkling. In the early second century, Didache reported that baptism was done in running water. If cold water was not present, they used warm. If there was not enough water available, they poured it on the head. Affusion (water poured on the head) was accepted in cases of extreme illness. After the second century it became the norm for everyone to have water poured on the head. Sprinkling did not start till the thirteenth century. But Eastern churches practice immersion still for infants. So also in England, infants were mostly dipped, unless very weak.

The rediscovery of believer's baptism did not mean an immediate return to immersion. The Anabaptists baptised thousands out of a milk pail. The early English Baptists used affusion till 1642, which was thirty years after the return to believer's baptism.

### Who should be baptised?

This question is more important than the question of how it should be done. It is certainly the Lord's command, what the Duke of Wellington called "The marching orders of the church". Matthew 28:19 makes it clear that disciples are to be baptised, i.e. believers. In Acts, when a baptism is recorded, previous faith in Christ is expressly stated or clearly implied. **You are all sons of God through faith in Christ**

**Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ** (Galatians :26,27).

The character and spirit of the New Covenant requires spiritual church members. The only members of the church in the New Testament were believers. This is why only believers were baptised.

In old Israel, people entered the community of the people of God by natural birth. They were born Jews, and circumcision followed. But in new Israel, people enter the community of the people of God by spiritual birth. Not because their parents are Christians, or because they were born in a “Christian country”. So in the New Testament, baptism was for those knowing spiritual birth. New Israel, unlike old Israel, is not a hereditary body. Grace does not run in the blood.

New Testament baptism signifies new birth, being saved, faith in Christ as Saviour and Master. In the New Testament, Christian baptism is baptism of the Christian. What of household baptisms? Did they not include children? There is no evidence that children were included. Indeed the implication is always that those in the household who were baptised had faith. In the case of the Philippians jailor’s household, **He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family** (Acts 16:34).

It is important to stress that New Testament baptism is not adult baptism, but is believer’s baptism. There is danger in departing from the New Testament. The baptising of infants, who can never by any definition be described as believers, has led down the centuries to ruinous effects. People have believed they are safe because they were “done” in childhood. This belief, that what was done to them in childhood means they are in God’s family, is one of the main obstacles to personal faith in Christ. It makes men fail to see their need of a Saviour; they are trusting in a false hope. Karl Barth points out that in the New Testament, one was not *brought* to baptism, but one *came* to baptism. Baptism is active, not something you passively have done to you.

Those who limit baptism to believers are criticised for being callous and harsh on children. Did Jesus not say, “Let the little children come to me”? But what had that to do with baptism? In the history of the church, those who limit baptism to believers have been most anxious to show care and compassion to children, e.g. the founders of great orphanages, Barnardo, Quarrier, Spurgeon, Muller - all of these were “Baptists”.

So the subjects of baptism in the New Testament were all believers. The reason is because New Testament Christians allowed only believers to be members of the church. So believers were baptised.

### Conclusion

This may be more of a history lesson than a sermon, yet we are dealing with a Scriptural subject, which expresses the will of the Head of the Church. It should lead us to thanksgiving to God who in wisdom and grace has given us the ordinances. They set forth His salvation, and are a means of participation. They help our faith and give a challenge to all.

Above all, they speak of our relationship to Christ. Obedience to the ordinances is laid down in the Bible, and we do well to take care and thought over such things.