



## **Ministry Visions**

A guide to water baptism for your altar ministers

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER BAPTISM**

When the apostle Paul arrived in Ephesus, he met twelve men who appeared to be Christians. However, when he discovered that they had not received the Holy Ghost, he asked them, "Unto what then were ye baptized?" (Acts 19:3). With this question, he probed their experience and understanding of God's plan. When they answered that they had been baptized with the baptism of John the Baptist, he immediately taught them of Jesus Christ and then baptized them in Christian baptism.

The question Paul asked the Ephesians believers is still pertinent today, for a person's baptism may be the best indicator of his concept of God and his level of experience in Christ. Water baptism is one of the foundational stones of the church (Hebrews 6:1-2), and it relates to the doctrinal structure and spiritual experience of its members. (See Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:10-13; Titus 3:5; I Peter 3:21.)

The Bible does not present water baptism as optional. Jesus gave the command of baptism in the great commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). At the least, this command of Jesus requires the church to make disciples by baptizing believers in the name of God. Thus water baptism here and throughout the New Testament is associated with Christian initiation. This commission from the Lord leaves us no option or alternative. We must baptize believers or disobey God's plan of salvation.

The numerous references to baptism in the Book of Acts reveal that the disciples diligently obeyed Jesus' commission. There are at least nine separate baptismal services recorded in Acts, and baptism is mentioned in the conversion experience of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. (See Acts 2:38-41; 8:12-16; 8:36-39; 9:18 and 22:16; 10:47-48; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 19:3-5.) Wherever people believed the preaching of the gospel, they were baptized.

The record in Acts therefore establishes the apostles' commitment to the commission of Jesus Christ to make disciples through water baptism. It is recorded in Acts that they baptized Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, an Ethiopian, Philipians, Corinthians, and followers of John the Baptist. No believer was excluded, and there is no record of any believer refusing to be baptized. As the disciples preached Jesus Christ they proclaimed that through repentance and water baptism a person can receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Ghost. (See Acts 2:38.)

The scriptural foundation of the gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:1-4). In our regeneration, we are to identify with Christ in each of these aspects. Repentance and water baptism identify with Christ's death and burial, and the infilling of the Spirit identifies with His resurrection (See Romans 6:4.) Thus water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ is one way we identify with Jesus and His work of our redemption.

It should be noted that in the Old Testament God assigned an important role to water in delivering His people and in dealing with sin. While Israel was still in Egypt, the Passover Lamb was slain, its blood placed on the houses, and its flesh eaten, but what finally separated the Israelites from Egyptian bondage was their crossing the Red Sea. Israel was "baptized" unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (I Corinthians 10:2).

In the Tabernacle service, the priests were instructed to wash at laver of water before they went before the Lord in the sanctuary. So important was washing at the laver that the priest who neglected to do so would die (Exodus 30:20). If God would not allow Moses, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, to enter the Promised Land because he broke the typology of Calvary by smiting the rock the second time, can anyone expect God to save those who break the gospel pattern on this side of Calvary by ignoring baptism and denying its place in God's plan to save lost humanity?

Some people suppose that Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth taught that water baptism was optional, but this supposition is an error. In dealing with the internal strife and division that entered around the ministries of Paul, Peter, and Apollos, the apostle used the argument that he had not baptized in his name and that he had baptized only a few of them. It is evident from Acts 18:8 that all the Corinthian believers were baptized. Apparently Paul baptized the leaders and they in turn baptized others.

We only need to look at two events in Paul's ministry to determine his commitment to water baptism. Late at night, after midnight, Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises in spite of their chains and the darkness of the dungeon in the prison. Earlier, they had been beaten by orders of the city authorities, who then had them cast into the prison. But while they sang, a miracle occurred. An earthquake shook the prison, the doors opened, and the chains fell from them. They witnessed to the jailer, who heard and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some people end the story at this point because they do not want to admit how the jailer expressed his faith. Paul and Silas told him about God's plan of salvation, and upon the jailer's confession of faith in Jesus, they ignored their pains, set aside needed rest, and did not wait for the morning sun to shine to baptize this Philippian jailer and those of his household (Acts 16:25-34).

The second event happened in Ephesus, where Paul felt that Christian baptism was so necessary that he baptized twelve disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-5). In this passage Paul clearly linked Christian faith with water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ and with receiving the Holy Ghost.

Paul's teaching on baptism reveals its central role in the salvation experience. (See Romans 6:1-4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; Titus 3:5.) Galatians 3:27 is an example of his belief that baptism is essential to salvation: "For as many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. "

We must not think, however, that water baptism is synonymous with salvation. A person could be baptized and still be lost. (See Acts 8:13-23.) But neither should a person think he can be saved without obeying the command of baptism. It is presumptuous for anyone to reject God's commandment in the matter of baptism, especially for someone who claims to be a believer of the gospel.

In the New Testament, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). If "born of water" refers to water baptism, there is no mistake about its necessity. But some people attempt to evade the necessity of baptism by interpreting "born of water" as "born of the Word." The Word is important in the salvation experience, for it is the source of our faith (Romans 10:17). However, to be born of the Word a person must believe and obey the Word. Since the Word points us to the cross, to repentance, to water baptism, and the infilling of the Spirit, the only way to be born of the Word is to believe, repent, be baptized, and receive the Spirit. It is significant that the apostles interpreted Jesus' teaching of being born again to mean water baptism and Spirit reception. (See Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:44-48; 19:1-6.)

We should notice that the Bible speaks of baptism "for the remission of sins." (See Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38.) On the cross Jesus shed His blood for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:22), and later He gave His disciples the authority to remit sins (John 20:23). Jesus' sacrificial death is the only means of remission of sin; He died once, and there is no other offering for sins. We do not offer sacrifices at altars today, but God gave us a way to receive remission of sins. (See Hebrews 10:18.) And that way is Water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. (See Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 22:16.)

Faith, repentance, the name of Jesus in water baptism and the infilling of the Spirit flow together to wash away our sins, sanctify our sinful nature, and justify us before a holy God. (See I Corinthians 6:11; Romans 6:1-7; Ephesians 5:26-27; Romans 15:16; Luke 24:47.)

We receive remission of sins through His name (Acts 10:43; Luke 24:47), which is enjoined in the baptismal formula. Ananias said to Paul, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). At baptism, the blood and water agree (I John 5:8). It is not the blood without the water or the water without the blood, but the blood and the water. By faith in His shed blood for the remission of sins, we repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to receive remission of our sins.

It does not matter if the water is dirty or fresh, muddy or clear, still or running, in a pond, lake, or river. But what does matter is the person's faith, his repentance, and the name of Jesus Christ. , the name of Jesus is vital, for only through the name of Jesus can a person experience salvation, including the remission of his sins (John 20:31; Acts 4:12; 10:43; Luke 24:47).