



CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

Lesson 14

CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

During this Course the words 'baptise' and 'baptism' have occurred a number of times. There is no doubt that baptism has an important place in the New Testament, and it is clear that all Christian converts, like the Lord Jesus Christ himself, were baptised.

"Those who received his [Peter's] word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (= people)" (Acts 2:41).

*"But when they believed Philip as he preached **the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**, they were baptised, both men and women" (Acts 8:12).*

*". . . many of the Corinthians hearing Paul **believed and were baptised**" (Acts 18:8).*

Belief and baptism

Note that belief comes before baptism. There is nothing in the Bible about baptising infants, a practice which began long after New Testament times, and which was based on the mistaken belief that infants have immortal souls. Before being baptised a person must be able to know and understand "the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ"; and to believe in God's promises. To have such faith means we believe what God has revealed to us.

The word of God

We cannot know the gospel taught by Jesus and the apostles without learning from God's word. Bible is the inspired word of God, and contains all that is necessary for our salvation. Jesus himself knew and believed the Old Testament, which was his Bible, and his answers to many questions began with the words, "*Have you not read?*" (Matthew 19:4). After his resurrection Jesus regretted that some of his disciples were so slow to understand and believe all that the Bible taught about him (Luke 24:25-27). Unless our faith is based on the word of God it is empty. Sadly, over time, the truth of God's word was adapted by the church to fit in with people's wishes. For example, belief in an immortal soul was popular and the church absorbed it. Worship of a female deity was a characteristic of many ancient religions. So the worship of the virgin Mary was introduced. Men were frequently elevated to the status of gods in the ancient world (for example the Roman Caesars). So it seemed perfectly normal to decide that Jesus was actually God Himself, although the Bible reveals him as the Son of God.

That is why, if we want to worship God "in spirit and in truth", we must read His word and study its message. We have to renounce the false teaching of the churches and believe what the word of God reveals.

This should lead to repentance, which means

(1) We accept that we have been going our own way, not God's way. Because sin separates us from God we need the forgiveness of our sins: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9). Of course, an infant cannot understand what sin and confession is all about.

(2) Baptism is the turning point, when we leave behind the broad road that leads to death, and take the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:13,14). This new life is now under the direction of Christ. We will try to follow his commandments and his example. When we fail, we know that because we are baptised into his name, we can be forgiven and remain in God's family.

Baptism and immersion

It is clear that in the early church, baptism meant being completely submerged in water. An example of this is when Philip the preacher was instructed by an angel to meet an "*Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopian,*" who was "*seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.*" (Acts 8:27,28).

He had been reading the Isaiah 53, which speaks of one who *“like a sheep was led to the slaughter . . .”*. Philip began to teach him from the Scripture *“the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptised? . . . and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him”* (Acts 8:26-38).

Jesus himself was baptised in the river Jordan (Matthew 3:13-17). Notice also that later on, when John the Baptist was baptising, he was at a place called Aenon, *“because water was plentiful there”* (John 3:23). It had to be enough to completely immerse people.

To increase our understanding of the meaning of baptism, we turn to the Bible again:

“All of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”(Romans 6:3)

Immersion, a burial in water, is necessary as a symbol of the death of our old life, and coming out of the water is a symbol of the beginning of a new life in Christ. It also means that just as Christ was raised from the dead to eternal life, we also have hope of rising from the dead to eternal life, at his return.

“If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5).

Clearly the sprinkling of a few drops of water on the forehead of an infant takes away the essential meaning of baptism, and destroys the symbolism of the act. Coming up out of the water, we are new creatures in the sight of God.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Baptism is therefore an act of union with Christ, both in his death and in his resurrection. By this union we are brought into the family of God, the household of faith. We can now call God our Father, and serve him as His sons and daughters. There is among us no barrier of class, colour or gender—we are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Through baptism we are “in Christ”, heirs of the promises made to Abraham:

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:26-29).

There remains then for all of us the question, “Why am I not truly baptised?” Let nothing stand in your way. If you truly believe *“the good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ”* (Acts 8:12), follow him along the path which leads to all the blessings of that Kingdom.

Summary

Christian baptism is by immersion in water, and must follow knowledge, understanding and belief in the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. It is a symbol of death and resurrection, and following baptism the believer begins a new life in the family of God.

Questions

O1 Why is knowledge and understanding of the gospel necessary for baptism to have any meaning?

O2 How does baptism become the beginning of a new life in Christ?