

What Baptism is and Why it Matters For You

BAPTISM IS NORMAL CHRISTIANITY

Jesus identified baptism as a defining action for all of his followers when he said: ***Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*** (Matt 28:19,20 NIV). Paul's comments to the Roman believers also show us that baptism was a definitive part of life in the early Christian community: ***We were... buried with him [Jesus] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life*** (Rom 6:3,4 NIV).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

A more helpful translation of the Greek word *baptizo* is the word 'immerse'. Throughout Greek literature, *baptizo* means to put something or someone *within* and *under* something else. So to be baptised in water actually means to be fully immersed in water.

The emphasis of the word *baptizo* is on the result of the 'immersing'. Think of clothing that is dipped into a coloured dye. The clothing is immersed in the dye, and the most important part of this process is how the dye transforms the clothing. Here's another picture: If a cucumber is placed in a jar of vinegar, after a while, that cucumber takes on the character of the vinegar while still retaining the qualities of a cucumber – we now call it a pickle.

This is the picture of *baptizo* – immersion. As followers of Jesus are immersed in water, it symbolises the reality that they have already been immersed into Jesus through repentance, receiving forgiveness, and submitting to Jesus' leadership of their life. As with the cucumber and the pickle, immersion into Christ alters a person's condition, such that you are still you, but you are now participating in a process of becoming more and more like Jesus.

FINDING OUR ROOTS

When Jesus and Paul spoke of immersion, they weren't talking about a new religious trend. The idea of immersing God's people in water didn't originate with them or with John the Baptist, but was a long standing Jewish practice for ritual cleansing. In the ruins of the temple in Jerusalem there are many *mikvahs*, or ritual baths, that can still be seen today. In centuries past, men and women who entered the temple for worship would undergo a 'self-baptism' by walking down steps into a *mikvah*, allowing the fresh, flowing waters to wash over them before exiting the bath on the other side. Non-Jews who committed themselves to worship God would also go through the *mikvah*, symbolically leaving their past behind and emerging to take their stand with the God of Israel and his people.

The immersion of 3000 people at Pentecost in Acts 2:41 continues this practice but redefines it around Jesus as the Messiah. Those 3000 people in Jerusalem weren't suddenly subscribing to a practice that held no meaning, nor did they have to walk far to find a baptism pool! The familiar practice of ritual cleansing was experienced in a brand new way for thousands on that day as they felt the waters wash over them, knowing that they were being immersed into the life of the Messiah himself. Their immersion was not in any way a renunciation of their 'Jewishness', but was an affirmation that Jesus was indeed Messiah and Lord of all, and it was through him that Israel's destiny was being fulfilled.

IMMERSION INTO JESUS THE MESSIAH

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus bring forth the full meaning of the ancient tradition of immersion. Romans 6:1-5 makes this clear. When immersed in water, the believer's actions declare: 'I am identified with Jesus in his death and burial'. As he/she comes up out of the water, the believer's actions say: 'I am identified with Jesus in his resurrection and victory over death and sin'.

In Romans 6:5, Paul uses the image of planting to describe the change of status that occurs through baptism. Once you've been planted in a particular soil, that is where you must grow. In baptism, you are planted into the death of Jesus, in order that you may now live as a renewed human being, planted also in his resurrection life. For those who have been baptised, a change of status has occurred – it is now time for us to walk in the grace (power) of God to bring our daily life into line with the person we have become, all the while looking forward to the day when our lowly bodies are transformed to be like his glorious body (Phil 3:21)!

YOUR OWN IMMERSION

Consider what this means for you today. If you have not yet experienced immersion into Jesus the Messiah and would like to pursue this, please contact us. New Life currently celebrates Baptisms twice a year, with opportunities typically provided in March and November.

E: info@newlifefreo.com T: 9336 5333.

Sources:

Adams, W., 'Bridges for Peace: Israel Teaching Letter' (Vol. 771105, 2005)

Ancient Hebrew Research Centre, http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/docs/39_miqveh.pdf

Rosen, C., 'Baptism – Pagan or Jewish?', http://jewsforjesus.org/publications/issues/2_10/baptism

Torrance, J.B., 'Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace' (IVP, 1996)

Wright, T., 'Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1' (SPCK, 2004)

newlife