

Discover Bible Studies

#19: Entering the Christian Life

Here is a thrilling letter from one of our Bible school representatives in Africa:

"Five years ago I received a request from the Voice of Prophecy to visit a prisoner who was a Bible correspondence school student. I presented the request to the prison authorities, who graciously gave permission. Because the student had a deep desire to study the Bible, I visited him regularly.

"About six months after my initial visit, he asked to be baptized and join the church. The authorities agreed to provide facilities so the baptism could take place in the prison. The wardens and other prisoners gathered to witness one of the most moving baptisms I have ever conducted.

"Shortly after this, our brother was released from jail, even though he still had considerable time to serve.

When I asked why, I was told that his life had changed so drastically, and he was such a witness for his Saviour and his religion that he could no longer be thought of as a prisoner, nor be treated as such. This man was united with his family and is now a leader in one of our large congregations."

1. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF BAPTISM?

When this prisoner became a Christian and his life completely changed, why was it important for him to be baptized? In a conversation with Nicodemus, the community leader who came to Jesus by night, Jesus makes clear the importance and meaning of baptism:

"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again . . . unless he is born of water and the Spirit." -John 3:3, 5. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

So according to Jesus we must be born "of water and the Spirit." "Born of the Spirit" signifies entering a new life by undergoing a change of mind and heart. Because entering the kingdom of God involves a completely new kind of existence, not just an old life patched up, it is called the new birth. Water baptism is the outward symbolic portrayal of this inward change. Our representative baptized the prisoner as a recognition of his commitment to Christ and as a symbol of the transformation the Holy Spirit had begun in his character.

2. WHY SHOULD I BE BAPTIZED?

Our salvation revolves around three of Christ's great acts:

"Christ DIED for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . he was BURIED . . . he was RAISED on the third day according to the Scriptures." -1 Corinthians 15:3, 4.

Christ made salvation possible through His death, burial, and resurrection.

"Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH? We were therefore BURIED WITH HIM 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." -Romans 6:3, 4.

Christ died for our sins, was buried, and then rose from the grave to give us a new life of righteousness. By being baptized we actually participate in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism means that we have died to sin with Christ, buried the old life of sin with Christ, and we are rising to "live a new life" in Christ. Christ's death and resurrection becomes our death and resurrection. God can make us dead to sin, as if we'd been crucified. He can make us alive to the things of the Spirit, as if we'd been resurrected from the dead.

The physical act of baptism graphically represents the steps of conversion. First, we're lowered into the water, we're immersed completely, just as people who have died are lowered into the grave and covered. This says we are willing to die with Christ and bury our old lifestyle. Baptism is a funeral, a formal farewell to an existence in which sin dominated. Then, we're lifted up out of the water by the one baptizing, just like a person being resurrected from the grave. This says that we're a "new creation," entirely given to the "new life" God gives us.

Only immersion can accurately illustrate the true meaning of baptism-death, burial, and rebirth. "Baptism" by sprinkling doesn't adequately symbolize the new birth.

What does it really mean to die with Christ?

"For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with [be rendered powerless, margin] that we should no longer be slaves to sin." - Romans 6:6.

Baptism represents outwardly what a person must do inside: surrender everything to Christ. If we hold anything back from God, then we'll likely remain "slaves to sin." When we surrender fully to Christ, our sinful desires are "rendered powerless," and our transformation begins.

Who is responsible for the change that takes place?

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but CHRIST LIVES IN ME. The life I live in the body, I LIVE BY FAITH IN THE SON OF GOD, who loved me and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20.

When I identify with Christ's crucifixion through baptism, I invite a powerful force into my life-"Christ lives in me."

In order to put your life fully in Christ's hands, first look at Christ dying on the cross. Don't look at the sin that's threatening you, don't look at your past record and moan; look to Jesus. Viewing Christ's gracious and courageous death at Calvary, you can express solidarity with Him: "By the power of the cross I claim that I am dead to old habits and responsive to God. I make my stand with Christ. From now on I will 'live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'"

As we tap into the power of Christ's death and resurrection we see more and more of His good qualities replacing our old habits:

"If anyone is IN CHRIST, he is A NEW CREATION; the OLD has gone, the NEW has come!" -2 Corinthians 5:17.

Through baptism we express our desire to lock arms with Jesus and live a new and better life "in Christ." Jesus does in us what we could never do for ourselves. We arise from the water "a new creation"; He gives us the power to live a "new" life.

3. WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

At Pentecost, Peter told those who were seeking release from guilt to "repent and be baptized" so Christ can forgive "your sins" (Acts 2:38). Since Jesus never committed a single sin, Why did He permit Himself to be baptized?

"Then JESUS CAME from Galilee TO THE JORDAN TO BE BAPTIZED by John . . . TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS." -Matthew 3:13, 15.

Jesus was sinless. He didn't need to repent of any sin. He was baptized for another reason: "to fulfil all righteousness." By being baptized, Jesus set a positive example for us weak, sinful human beings. Christ never asks His followers to go anywhere He hasn't been. So when believers are immersed in the waters of baptism, they are following in the steps of the Master.

Because Christ died for our sins, He can give us His righteousness.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." -2 Corinthians 5:21.

Transformed in God's eyes from sinners into saints, we grow into that "righteousness," and thus we live a new life in Christ.

4. WHY SHOULD I BE IMMERSSED?

Christ was immersed at His baptism; He was not sprinkled with water. John baptized Him in the Jordan River "because there was PLENTY OF WATER" (John 3:23). When Jesus was baptized, He went down into the water, and "as soon as Jesus was baptized [immersed, Greek], he went UP OUT OF THE WATER" (Matthew 3:16).

When we understand the true meaning of baptism, we have little difficulty recognizing the authentic form of baptism. The very word "baptize" comes from the Greek word baptizo, and means to dip or immerse (put under).

During John Wesley's visit to America in 1737, a church jury of 34 men tried him on the strange charge of "refusing to baptize Mr. Parker's child, except by dipping." It's evident that the father of Methodism baptized his converts by immersion.

The reformer John Calvin stated: "It is certain that immersion was the practice of the ancient Church." -Institutes of the Christian Religion, Bk. 4, Chap. 15, Sec. 19.

The history of the early church makes clear that baptism meant immersion. Dean Stanley, of the Church of England, wrote: "For the first thirteen centuries, the almost universal practice of baptism was that of which we read in the New Testament, and which is the very meaning of the word 'baptize'-that those who were baptized were plunged, submerged, immersed into the water." Christian Institutions, p. 21.

Baptisteries for immersing converts appear in many of the churches which were built between the fourth and fourteenth centuries in Europe and Asia, churches like the cathedral in Pisa, Italy, and St. John's, the largest church in Rome.

It was not until the Council of Ravenna early in the fifteenth century that the Catholic Church accepted sprinkling as equally valid with immersion. In questions of church practice, we are not to follow what a man teaches, but what Christ and His apostles teach.

Many sincere Christians cherish the tradition of infant baptism, and giving our children to God from the very beginning is certainly commendable. The Bible, however, makes it clear that a person must be taught the way of salvation before baptism (Matthew 28:19, 20), that a person must believe in Jesus before being baptized (Acts 8:35-38), and that a person must repent of sin and be forgiven before being baptized (Acts 2:38). A baby is incapable of believing, repentance, or confession, which must precede baptism.

5. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE BAPTIZED?

According to Jesus, baptism is essential for those who wish to enter heaven:

"No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" -John 3:5.

Jesus gives only one exception. The thief on the cross was "born of the Spirit," even though it was impossible for him to leave the cross and be immersed in water as a sign of his change of heart. And Jesus promised him that he would be with Him in the kingdom (Luke 23:42, 43). For the thief, being "born of water and of the Spirit" represents the blood of Jesus which was being spilt to cleanse him from his sins. Augustine observed, "There is one case of deathbed repentance recorded, that of the penitent thief, that none should despair; and only one, that none should presume."

Jesus Himself gave this solemn warning:

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe [and therefore is not baptized] will be condemned." -Mark 16:16.

By dying in our place at Calvary, Jesus made a public demonstration of His love for us. We need to respond with a public, unashamed confession of our commitment to Christ through baptism. Have you begun a new life in Christ? Have you been baptized? If not, why not prepare for baptism in the near future?

6. BAPTISM IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

Baptism represents our commitment to a Christian lifestyle. But our surrender at baptism doesn't automatically last a lifetime.

When a child is born, a celebration is in order. After the day of birth is over and the excitement subsides, the baby requires daily feeding, daily bathing, and daily concern for its welfare. It's much the same with baptism. Paul said of his experience, "I die every day" (1 Corinthians 15:31). By daily turning from selfishness, we become more and more responsive to Christ.

The rite of baptism, like the wedding ceremony, was meant to be the formal confirmation that a wonderful and growing relationship has begun. In order to grow consistently, we need a daily giving of ourselves to Christ, a daily reception of a new life through prayer and Bible study.

7. A CAUSE FOR REJOICING

Baptism is cause for great rejoicing because those who place their faith in Christ have the assurance of eternal life. "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). When we are baptized, we're on an upward path leading us to eternal joy.

Baptism also celebrates a present happiness with Christ. He promises the priceless gift of the Holy Spirit to those baptized (Acts 2:38). With the Spirit comes "the fruit of the Spirit"- "love," which fills the life with "patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22, 23).

Having Jesus living inside us by His Holy Spirit gives a profound sense of certainty. For "the Spirit himself testifies . . . that we are God's children" (Romans 8:15, 16).

This secure relationship with God brings us many benefits, but it doesn't guarantee a problem-free life. In fact, the enemy often tries to throw the most difficulties at those who've just made a commitment to Christ. However, when we're in God's hands we can know that He will use everything that happens to us, good and bad, to teach us and help us grow (see Romans 8:28).

A young woman made a decision to commit her life to Christ and be baptized, in spite of her husband's threat of divorce. He wanted no part of her new faith, but she stuck to Jesus and tried to become a more loving wife than ever before. For some time the husband made things difficult at home. But finally he was won over by an argument he couldn't answer: her transformed life. This man surrendered his life to Christ and he too was baptized.

Sticking close to Christ through "thick and thin" will make us powerful instruments in His hands. We can commit our lives to Him unconditionally because He has already made the ultimate commitment to us when He paid the price for our sins on the cross. What a privilege it is to publicly give Him our love and allegiance! If you haven't yet done so, why not surrender your life to Christ right now. Ask Him to create a new life in you by the Holy Spirit, and then be baptized into Christ.

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