

"He who believes and is baptized will be saved..." Mark 16:16

BAPTISM

WHAT IT MEANS AND WHY IT MATTERS



Those who accepted his message were baptized,
and about three thousand were added to their
number that day. They devoted themselves to
the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the
breaking of bread and to prayer.

~ Acts 2:41-42 (NIV)

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Baptism

What It Means and Why It Matters

What does the Bible say about baptism?

Quite a lot! Baptism is mentioned in 42 different chapters of the New Testament. The gospels of Matthew and Mark both end with the resurrected Jesus giving his disciples a commission to preach the gospel, and to baptize:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

The book of Acts records their early work, and baptism is mentioned in 16 of its 28 chapters.

The Apostle Paul's baptism is a notable example. Paul went from being an enemy and persecutor of Jesus' followers to being their keenest preacher. His writings make up nearly half of the New Testament. This amazing conversion began with a vision of the resurrected Jesus appearing in blinding light. For three days Paul could not see. Then a believer named Ananias was sent to him. Ananias spoke to Paul, using Paul's Hebrew name "Saul":

'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and Saul received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. (Acts 9:17-18)

Baptism was the first step in a new life for Paul, and so also for all of the new converts in the book of Acts. Chapter 2 of Acts describes the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost, just 7 weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Peter was the leading disciple among Jesus' twelve closest associates. On this occasion he spoke publicly, arguing convincingly that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that his death and resurrection had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets. To those who were convinced, Peter said,

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... [and] then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. (Acts 2:38-41)

There can be no question that baptism was an important feature of the early Christian community. But still, questions remain: does it really matter if we are baptized? Does it matter how we are baptized? What's it all about? Looking for answers, we will begin with the first references to baptism. These references are found in describing the work of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus

Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. He was unknown beyond his hometown of Nazareth. Far better known was Jesus' relative, John, who became known as "John the Baptist" because of his work:

*All the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.
(Mark 1:5)*

John's message was simple. He taught that people needed to repent of their sins and lead a godly, decent life. It wasn't enough to be Jewish, a descendant of faithful Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation (Matthew 3:9). It wasn't who they were descended from that mattered, but how they lived. The well-off should share with the poor. Tax collectors should never cheat those from whom they collected. Soldiers (the police of the time) should never intimidate or falsely accuse, and should be content with their wages. Repentance meant turning away from sin, and living lives that showed a change of heart.

Many came to John desiring changed lives. These John baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The gospels give us few details about John's baptism except that he chose locations where there was plenty of water, and that the one baptized went down into the water with John.

Later in the New Testament, baptism is referred to as a "washing away" of sins (for example, Acts 22:16). If our conscience works, there's something about sin that makes us feel dirty. For John's followers, the act of baptism was an act of cleansing. They went home feeling that they had made a fresh start. The simple ritual had a profound meaning.

John had another message for his contemporaries. It was important that they not have too high an opinion of him. He was not the Christ, the promised Messiah. He was not the great Prophet, the one like Moses that the Jews expected God to send. No, John's mission was only to prepare the way for one who was coming.

Jesus began his ministry by going to John the Baptist and asking to be baptized. One might wonder why Jesus, being sinless, should desire to be baptized.

John himself wondered! At first John adamantly refused, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” (Matthew 3:14). Jesus said, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” and John consented. Evidently, there was more to baptism than the forgiveness of sins.

What is it all about?

The baptism chapter—the old and the new

For some Bible teachings there is one chapter in the Bible that gives a particularly clear and complete explanation. Romans 6 is such a chapter; it is a good “go to” chapter on baptism. It clearly explains the significance of baptism, and answers our questions about whether baptism matters. It also helps us understand how it should be done. We can learn a lot about baptism from other Scriptures, but Romans 6 is a good starting place. Let’s take a close look at this chapter.

Background

In his letter to the Romans, Paul carefully explains that our salvation is a gift from God. Salvation is not earned like pay for employment. No one deserves salvation; no one is entitled to it. Paul says that salvation is entirely God’s gift, given by God to those who are faithful.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

This was a challenging teaching for the Jews in Paul’s audience who felt their descent from Abraham gave them an advantage. Some felt that they could put God in their debt through their religious behavior, that they could earn salvation.



Paul says these were “seeking to establish their own righteousness” (Romans 10:3), but that righteousness can only be obtained as God’s gift to those who have faith.

Nowadays, many Christians have swung to another view of salvation. They reason that salvation is based on faith alone, so all that matters is that we believe. What we do doesn’t matter, they say. Only believe, and you will be saved. This view stands in plain contradiction to many passages of Scripture. For instance, in Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus describes the last judgment as being based on our behavior, on how we have treated others. It is not true that belief is all that matters, and that what we do has no bearing on our salvation.

Paul anticipated this mistaken view. Romans 6 starts like this: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” (v. 1).

It’s a perverse way of looking at things that says, “I’m good at sinning, and God’s good at forgiving, so I’ll sin a whole lot, and give God lots of opportunity to forgive! I’ll continue in sin, and God’s grace will abound!” So Paul poses the question: is this how we’re to look at things?

The old—dead to sin

As soon as Paul raises the question, he strongly denounces the misconception behind it. “Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (v. 2). With these words, Paul begins a beautiful and encouraging explanation of the meaning of baptism.

Baptism, Paul says, is like a burial. The “old man” was a “slave of sin” (vs. 6,17). Baptism is the burial of the old man, of the old way of life. When we are baptized, we take on a new identity. This sense of a new identity is so strong we might think of the former identity as belonging to a different person.

In another letter Paul encourages us to

*put off, concerning your former conduct, **the old man** which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on **the new man** which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)*



“Shall we continue in sin?” was the question asked at the beginning of Romans 6. The answer is that sin was part of the old identity, and that the old man has died; the new life initiated at baptism is no longer a slave to sin.

There’s more. Paul says that baptism is like Jesus’ death. He says that, “as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death...we have been united together in the likeness of His death” (Romans 6:3,5).

These words are at first puzzling, but careful reading and contemplation of the context gives their meaning, and, strong encouragement. The old man hasn’t merely died, he’s been crucified: “our old man was crucified with Him” (v. 6). We are led to contemplate the Lord Jesus, his dedication and devotion. With full knowledge of what lay before him, he went through the terrible death of the cross. The sacrifice of Jesus shows his complete dedication and commitment to do God’s will. Our baptism likewise expresses a desire to completely follow the will of God. Baptism demonstrates commitment.

The new—alive to God

There’s still more. Paul says,

He who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. (Romans 6:7-10)

What does it mean that Jesus “dies no more” and that “death no longer has dominion over Him”? Simply this: Jesus was mortal, just like us. Death had dominion over him. He was subject to temptation, and fought the same battles as we do against it. Hebrews 4:15 says that he “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” In Romans 6:23 Paul says, “the wages of sin is death.” Sin and death are cause and effect, and Jesus was just like us in being tempted; the only difference was that he never gave in.

When Jesus died, so did the temptations. Raised to immortality by God, Jesus was made free from “the law of sin and death” mentioned in Romans 8:2.



One of the great blessings in store for those who truly follow Christ is to be freed from sin like he was. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). So for Jesus, death brought a great liberation: He now “lives to God” (6:10), no longer subject to sin.

Paul’s point is that if baptism is related to the death of Christ, to a burial of the old man, then we ought to think also about baptism in relation to Christ’s resurrection. One rises from baptism to a new life. In this new life one must consider him or her self “dead indeed to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). Paul makes the point again in another of his letters:

having been buried with him in baptism...you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12)

An end and a beginning

So baptism is an end and a beginning – the end of an old way of life as a slave to sin; the beginning of a new life, as one wholly devoted to God. Indeed, Paul says that one goes from being “slaves of sin” to being “slaves of righteousness” (Romans 6:17-18). But this is a good slavery! Hear how Paul concludes his argument:

Just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:19-23)

Sin pays a wage—death. God gives a gift—eternal life. Our baptism is a symbolic death to sin and a commitment to godliness. Jesus spoke about counting the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:25-33). He said that the cost might be high. Friends and family might hate us, and, true discipleship involves “taking up the cross and following him” (Luke 14:27, Matthew 10:38). We must put to death, crucify the old life. Paul’s point in these final verses of Romans 6 is that though the cost might be high, the return is certainly worth it.



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Questions about baptism

At the outset we posed some questions about baptism: does it matter if we are baptized? when should we be baptized? and, how should we be baptized? Our consideration of Romans 6 has laid the groundwork for finding Bible answers to these questions. We will begin with the “how” of baptism.

How should we be baptized

There can be no doubt that in New Testament times baptism was done by complete immersion in water. For example, we read of John the Baptist that he “was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (John 3:23). If a cupful of water would have sufficed, John could have baptized anywhere.

After Jesus’ baptism, he “came up” from the water (Matt 3:16). A baptism described in Acts 8 involves two men traveling in a chariot, one teaching the other the gospel of the Lord Jesus. The two found a place where there was water, and they “went down *into* the water” and “came up *out* of the water” (Acts 8:36-39).

Confirmation of this understanding is found in the Greek word used for baptism: The word is “baptizo,” from which we get our word “baptism.” It means “to dip.” The word was “used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment.”¹ One wouldn’t dye a garment by sprinkling it. The sense of the word is so clear that some translations of the Bible refer to John the Baptist as “John the Immerser.”

Think again of Paul’s teaching in Romans 6 where he shows that baptism is a symbolic burial of an old way of life. How appropriate it is that baptism is performed by complete immersion. How clearly inappropriate it would be to change the way Jesus and the apostles did it on the basis that some other way might be more convenient.

In the Old Testament history books, we find the account of Naaman, a Syrian general who had contracted leprosy (2 Kings 5). A young Jewish servant in his house urged him to seek healing from Israel’s God through the prophet Elisha.

1 Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W.E. Vine.



*Dye, for
colouring fabric*

Her encouragement and the severity of the illness was enough to convince him to give it a try. Elisha told Naaman that if he wanted to be healed, he would have to dip himself seven times in the muddy river Jordan. Naaman's initial reaction was indignation—weren't there cleaner, better rivers in Syria? But his servants prevailed on him, and he did as Elisha commanded. On emerging from the water the seventh time, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (2 Kings 5:14). The leprosy was gone.

It is remarkable to note that the Greek version of the Old Testament, the one used by early Gentile Christians, used the word "baptize" to describe Naaman being "dipped" in the water.

This Old Testament event is a very powerful image of what baptism is and what baptism does: buried in a symbolic death, associated with Jesus' death and burial, and then rising out of the water to a completely new life. In this moment, one is washed and cleansed—better than Naaman—because this baptism is a first step toward eternal life!

When should we be baptized?

The apostle Peter describes baptism as "the answer of a good conscience toward God" (1 Peter 3:21). This doesn't mean a clear conscience, but a properly functioning conscience. When a person finally realizes they have not followed God's ways and stand in need of His forgiveness; when one wants to put away their old sinful way of life and begin a new life patterned after Christ's life; and when one understands the commitment they are making—then they should be baptized.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, he spent 40 days instructing his disciples in how they should preach the gospel (Acts 1:1-8). The gospel of Mark has a brief summary of the commission Jesus gave the disciples:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)

We notice two things on reading this: First, Jesus speaks of those who believe and are baptized, and of those who do not believe. He doesn't even mention any who believe and are not baptized. It's as if to say that when one believes, they will be baptized. Why would anyone engage in speculations about whether baptism is necessary for salvation? Why would anyone say that it is merely "the outward sign of an inward change"?

Of course, the inward change is vital, otherwise all baptism does is get us wet. But to say that baptism is optional seems presumptuous. We should consider participation in this rite as an honor that associates us with believers through all the centuries since Jesus and associates us with the Lord Jesus himself.

Our second observation is that, as in the reference we have seen in 1 Peter 3:21, belief precedes baptism: “He who *believes* and is baptized will be saved.” Such is the pattern throughout the New Testament: “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38); “many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

If belief and repentance are to precede baptism, and if baptism is a sign of personal commitment, then surely baptism can only be for those who are old enough to understand its significance, and not for infants.

An example for us

Acts 8:26-40 describes the conversion and baptism of an Ethiopian, “a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians.” This man appears to have been a convert to Judaism, and had just visited Jerusalem to worship. On his way back to Ethiopia, the eunuch was reading from the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah.

The passage he was reading (Isaiah 53) was a remarkable prophecy of the sacrifice of Christ. It had been written 600 years earlier, but now recently fulfilled. The eunuch was trying to understand this passage.

It was a difficult time for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem because of a great persecution that arose against them (Acts 8:1). One of the Christians driven from Jerusalem was an enthusiastic preacher named Philip. This man was sent by an angel to meet the Ethiopian eunuch. When Philip approached the eunuch’s chariot, Philip found him reading Isaiah’s prophecy and asked if the eunuch understood what he was reading. The eunuch replied that he needed help, and invited Philip to join him in the chariot. So Philip joined him “and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him” (8:35).

Evidently, “preaching Jesus” meant more than describing who Jesus was, what he’d taught, and the reality of his resurrection. “Preaching Jesus” included some teaching about baptism, because, “as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ ” (8:36).

Philip’s response was that if the Ethiopian was whole-hearted in his belief, he could be baptized. It was just like his recent preaching in Samaria: when people believed the gospel of the kingdom of God, and understood how God’s purpose

centered in Jesus, then it was time to be baptized (Acts 8:12). The eunuch's reply was simple: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." He had been convinced that the things he had learned as a convert to Judaism were now made full with the understanding of Jesus as Son of God, his sacrifice as foretold in Isaiah, and belief in the resurrection.

So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:38-39)

The eunuch believed, and was baptized. He "went down into the water"—fully immersed—and came up to a new life to follow after Jesus Christ. And "he went on his way rejoicing."

How baptism connects us to Abraham

The importance of baptism is highlighted by its relationship to the promises God made to Israel's patriarch Abraham.

Abraham is one of the most important people of the Bible. His history is given in Genesis, chapters 12-25. The defining characteristic of Abraham's personality was his unwavering faith in God.

*The eunuch believed, and was baptized. He "went down into the water"—fully immersed—**and came up to a new life to follow after Jesus Christ.** And "he went on his way rejoicing."*

On one occasion, God promised Abraham that in due time he would have so many descendants that counting them would be as impossible as counting the stars on a cloudless night.

He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'. (Genesis 15:5)

Abraham was quite old at the time, and childless, so it would have been easy to doubt. But Scripture says Abraham “believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (15:6).

As the life of Abraham progressed, God made more and greater promises to him. He promised to give him the land of Israel as his own personal possession, forever (Genesis 13:14-17). Implicit in this promise was the hope of resurrection and eternal life for Abraham. Why? Because Abraham died without ever possessing the land (Acts 7:5). To possess it, he must live again—and forever—if God is going to be true to His word.

Why should you care? Because this promise was not made just to Abraham, it was also made to his descendants:

I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (Genesis 17:8)



Aerial landscape of Jezreel Valley. Taken from Mount Tavor in Lower Galilee, Israel.

How, then, can you share in this inheritance promised to Abraham and his offspring? Consider these words of Paul:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

It is only through baptism which makes us part of Christ that we have this wonderful hope; there's no other way. In another place Paul is emphatic about the restricted nature of this promise:

At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:12-13)

If we never believe the Gospel and seek baptism into Christ we will remain "strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."



It is this Abrahamic promise that is the source of the Psalmist's assurance that "the meek shall inherit the earth." This is stated five times in Psalm 37 (vv. 9,11,22,29,34) and Jesus quotes this Psalm in his Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

So in Christ through baptism, we can have hope. These promises, made to Abraham and extended to all who follow his example of faithfulness, are for us as well when we are baptized. We are "baptized into Christ" and become "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."²

How baptism connects us to others

It might sound strange to say we are "baptized into Christ." The phrase "in Christ" is a common New Testament figure of speech. Its sense becomes clear as we hear it used.

Here are some examples:

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

[T]here is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

Peace to you all who are in Christ Jesus" (1 Peter 5:14).

[I]f Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. (1 Corinthians 15:17-19)

Being "in Christ" means having a changed status, a changed identity, peace and confidence in a precious relationship with God.

Part of this new identity also involves our relationship with other believers. In one helpful passage (1 Corinthians 12), the community of faithful believers is compared to a body. Paul describes how our natural body has many different parts—hands, feet, ears, eyes—all with different functions, all crucial, all cared for.

So it is with the "body of Christ" (12:27); all of the different parts ("members") are needed "and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (12:26). In describing this body, Paul says "we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free" (12:13).

2 See another booklet in this series on the Kingdom of God: *Is a Better World Possible?*

We have seen that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. We have seen that it is a symbolic burial of an old way of life and the start of a new life. But that's not all. It is also the means by which we become part of the body of Christ and heirs of the promises to Abraham. Being part of this one body brings us into fellowship and collaboration with other believers, working together and caring for one another.

Baptism compared to circumcision

There is one other symbol used in the Old Testament that helps us appreciate the significance of baptism. For the Jewish people, circumcision of baby boys on their eighth day provided a symbol of the nation's relationship with God (Genesis 17:10-14). It was the sign of the covenant between God and His people (17:11). If a foreigner wanted to be fully associated with God's people in worship, he had to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant, and symbolized a commitment to God's way and to spiritual purity. Thus Moses could tell the Jews to "circumcise their heart" (Deuteronomy 10:16). In the New Testament, Paul could exhort believers that "he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit" (Romans 2:29).

Thinking of these things, we can see the similarity between baptism and circumcision. Both have to do with our relationship with God, both involve a physical act with spiritual significance. So it is not surprising that the New Testament compares baptism and circumcision:

In Christ you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12)



Conclusion

We have seen that baptism means immersion, and that this immersion is a symbolic burial of an old way of life. We have seen that belief precedes baptism, and that baptism is the beginning of a new life of faith and commitment. Through baptism, sins are washed away. Baptism associates us with Jesus, making us part of the body of Christ. And, it makes us heirs of the great promises God made to Abraham, promises that pertain to the hope of resurrection and eternal life.

Perhaps the question of the Ethiopian eunuch echoes in our mind: “What keeps me from being baptized?” For some it is self-doubts. Baptism may seem too large a commitment. Some might feel, “but I’m not good enough.” Or, “what if I sin after being baptized?”

If these are your feelings, be reassured. One is not baptized because he or she is perfect. Rather, baptism is for those who want to be perfect. God fully understands our weaknesses, and can be depended upon to forgive us if we repent: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Jesus promises, “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). If it is the Father’s pleasure to give the kingdom to Jesus’ followers, will He not help us overcome those things that would hinder our faithfulness and obedience to Jesus?

Baptism is a first step of commitment on the road to eternal life. “Believe and be baptized” (Mark 16:16) says the voice of Jesus from the pages of the Bible. It is a voice worth heeding.

~ Bill Link



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BAPTISM

Some Christians practice adult baptism, some baptize infants. Some believe it is an essential part of Christian life, others regard it as optional. Some baptize by immersion, some by sprinkling a few drops of water or by pouring water from a cup.

What is baptism really about? Why does it seem so important in New Testament times and the Christianity preached then? And what does it have to do with me?

These and many more questions are considered in this booklet. Hopefully, you will walk away after reading this with not just a new appreciation for this ancient act, but you will become excited about it!

There is much more involved in the subject of baptism than you might think.