



**A
BAPTISM
WORTH TALKING ABOUT**

Jim McGuiggan

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DEDICATION

To Gerald and Bobby Paden

*Who learned, loved and lived
“The Way”*

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FOREWORD

Though this little book speaks about baptism, it doesn't speak about baptism "in and of itself". In the New Testament (NT) there is no such thing as baptism "in and of itself." Like faith and repentance or obedience to God's call, it is always related to Jesus Christ in and through whom salvation is brought to sinners. He alone is the atoning sacrifice and the exalted Faithful One, the Son of God, the Lord of All and the Coming Redeemer and Judge.

The book doesn't say that baptism is "the most important" subject we can speak about – far from it! But it insists that baptism is worth talking about, that it's a critically important issue but that it's only a critically important issue because it takes as its heart and center the blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

There's no suggestion here that the truth about baptism is as large or as fundamental as the truth that God lives and reigns or that Jesus in his faithfulness and as an atoning sacrifice brings salvation to sinners and blessing to the entire human family. No, baptism has no meaning without the massive foundational truths of the biblical witness on which it rests, by which it is shaped and to which it points.

Still, the sovereign God and the Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit has given baptism a place in the unfolding of God's eternal purpose. That being the case those who love and trust him will give it the degree of importance the Godhead has given it as it relates to personal salvation *and*

the Church's witness for Jesus before and for the blessing of the entire human family.

In some quarters there are some who are weary of hearing nothing about baptism other than that it is "a requirement for salvation." In other quarters there's a revival of interest and a vigorous attempt across church-community boundaries to honour God by honoring the truth he has invested in the baptism of believers.

The aim here is to express some aspects of the place I believe baptism is given in the NT and perhaps to enable us better to honour God by honoring it in its place.

I'm aware that the presentation here is a bit repetitive but I thought it best to leave it that way. It's repetitive in part because many of the truths about NT baptism overlap.

Then there's this: I'm often surprised by how many times I hear or read something that doesn't truly register without the repetition. This is especially true when I've been reading things I didn't agree with. I suppose I must be subconsciously dismissing them without serious consideration and I'm sure I tend to do that when I think the issue I'm looking at might prove costly to me. I'm trying by God's grace to see that truth might be costly to me but it nevertheless "frees" me and, costly or not, it enriches and blesses me more than it costs. I'm certain you know what I mean.

God bless you as you reflect on this.

– Jim McGuiggan

**IS BAPTISM WORTH
TALKING ABOUT?**

IS BAPTISM WORTH TALKING ABOUT?

1. The short answer is yes and the most obvious reason for “yes” is that *God* originated baptism and talked about it throughout the New Testament. But that short answer needs developed. We’re not to read the Bible as if God said: “I’ve spoken so just shut up and do what I say.” That’s not the tone at all! While we’re called to be obedient we’re not called to grovel – he isn’t that kind of God.

2. In addition, it’s clear that all God’s commands and truths relate to life with him and the richness of that life. God doesn’t just think up commands for us to obey so he can show that he’s “the boss” and they aren’t hoops we must jump through if we want to be saved. The commands come from a Holy Father who has created us to live with one another in joy and peace and in warm righteousness; they don’t come from some self-obsessed megalomaniac (see Philippians 2:5-7).

Should we make a fuss about baptism?

3. There are several things we need to keep clearly in mind and one of them is this: modern believers didn’t invent baptism! Ignoring for the moment some distinctions that need to be remembered we need to recall that Jesus himself was baptized and that in his ministry he baptized thousands, though he had his disciples doing the actual baptizing (see **Matthew 3:5-6** with **John 4:1-2** and

Matthew 3:13-16). Nothing Jesus ever engaged in is to be dismissed as unimportant. Before he returned to his Father he sent the apostles into the entire world with the command to make disciples in all nations, baptizing them into a relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

4. That *he* practised it and then commanded it for all nations should be enough for us to take it with the utmost seriousness. There is much more to baptism than the truth that it is a command from Jesus but how can we make little or nothing of it when it is at least that?

Baptism: Does it deflect us from the major issues?

5. Yes, but doesn't making a big thing out of baptism sound strange in a world that's filled with wars and hunger, disease and desperation; should we not be talking about things more to the point; things more central to the needs of the world?

6. I've heard non-believers say the same thing about the preaching of forgiveness of sins, eternal life and "a home in heaven". For generations they've been saying, "Let's have less talk about mansions in glory for the faithful and more about homes here on earth for the impoverished and oppressed." Many believers think that talking about baptism is a waste of good time and energy and say that spending time on "church ordinances" deflects us from "the real issues".

7. Perhaps, but we need to remember that one night when the world was just as filled with wars and hunger and disease as it is now that the Savior took twelve men aside in an upper room and engaged in a “church ordinance” and transformed it into Holy Communion or “The Lord’s Supper”. It isn’t wise to become more pious than Jesus and if he thought a “church ordinance” was important enough for him to engage in and give it as a gift to his Church maybe we ought to give it serious consideration. Of course, it isn’t that we have to choose between “practical involvement” in peoples’ lives and attending to “ordinances” like Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We ought to pay attention to both! We need to remember that Baptism is no more “inward looking” than the Supper of the Lord is; they both point beyond the worshipper to profound and world-shaping truths.

8. Doing and teaching compassionate and honorable deeds out of a sincere heart doesn’t give us the liberty to *refuse* to do and teach other things that God has laid on us. We need to give **Matthew 5:19** a careful hearing and we need to remember that a God-loving and God-fearing gentleman was commanded to be baptized even after God had publicly approved of him in numerous ways that culminated in his sending the Holy Spirit on him (**Acts 10:47-48**).

9. If we arrogate to ourselves the liberty to ignore *any* command of God, if we knowingly teach and influence others to do this we give ourselves the right of judgment over them all. This is precisely the point of **James 2:10-**

11. It isn't for us to pick and choose what we'll take seriously and what we will obey and teach.

10. "Yes, but if a person has true faith in Jesus why should we bother him about baptism – isn't *faith* the central call that God makes on people?" If a person has true faith we wouldn't be *bothering* him to talk about baptism. He would *want* us to talk to him about it and would think we had been robbing him if he later came to know we consciously withheld truth about it. Certainly faith that works on the basis of covenant love to Christ (Galatians 5:6) is the central stress in the NT but the New Testament itself shapes the content and expression of NT faith. For example, James who passionately insisted on justification by faith in Jesus refused to recognize faith as true faith if it wouldn't fulfill a plain call from God (see **James 2:1-12, 14-26** and **1 John 3:17**). That is, what God has plainly called for, true faith will attend to when it comes to be the believer's attention. What faith cannot do and still call itself faith is to *refuse* God's call without apology or conscience.

11. Then there's this: baptism isn't only about the believer – it concerns God's gospel proclamation in the presence of the entire human family. [See the discussion below.]

The NT doesn't make "a fuss" of baptism

12. Let's be clear about this: to teach and practice NT baptism is not the same as "making a fuss" of it. It is

obedience to the will of the Holy Father and he doesn't "make a fuss" about anything!

13. It seems to me that it's the people who *refuse* to teach and make a practice of baptism who make the "fuss". Look, no one in the NT ever denied the truth that believers needed to be baptized and no one ever tried to *prove* that they had to be. There was no "fuss" about it. They argued about all kinds of things but they never argued about believers having to be baptized into Christ.

14. It's the very fact that the NT *doesn't* make "a fuss" about baptism that should strike us with great force. Let me repeat, in the NT no one *argued* about it! They obeyed it without question and took it for granted that *everyone* was baptized. Notice that assumption in places like Romans 6:3-5. Many texts like that led scholars like Beasley-Murray and Schnackenburg to say that limiting baptism by saying it wasn't required at all times for all people "is unknown to Paul. To him it is for every man the regular means of becoming a Christian." [Quoted in *Believer's Baptism*, page 68.] You simply can't read the New Testament and think baptism is a trivial issue. No one in the NT dreams of saying anything like, "Oh dear, more talk about church ordinances when the world is starving and lost. What a pity we have to descend to trivial issues." The New Testament shows that baptism is a very significant matter and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. Neither should we intentionally give others the impression that we think it is unimportant or trivial.

The NT takes baptism for granted

15. Let me repeat this also: no one in the New Testament ever tries to *prove* anything about baptism; they simply call for it and those who want Jesus as Lord just as simply obey it. When thousands wanted to be right with God in Christ they were told to repent and be baptized upon the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:37-41**). And not only did they do it without argument – they did it “gladly”! Saul the persecutor waited to be told what to do to have his sins washed away and enter a living adventure as an apostle and a man told him to wait no longer but to have himself baptized to wash away his sins, calling on the Lord’s name (**Acts 22:16**). Neither Peter nor Ananias nor Paul was attempting to *prove* anything about baptism and the people who obeyed didn’t ask, “Do I *have* to be baptized?”

16. All this debating business is a modern thing that developed out of Catholic – Protestant and then inter-Protestant controversy. You don’t find a breath of it in the New Testament! And no one in the New Testament is reluctant to bring it up to those who want to be saved in Jesus. In the New Testament everyone just blurts it out and people submit to it without a moment’s hesitation.

17. Today many people don’t want to mention it. It’s like introducing the topic of your crazy uncle Charlie at a fancy dinner of aristocratic intellectuals. Nothing like this happens in the NT. No one’s embarrassed by the subject – Christian or non-Christian. A pagan jailer and his family is baptized in the middle of the night (**Acts 16:27-33**). A

high-ranking diplomat travelling through a desert area insists that a stranger baptize him then and there and goes back home thrilled with finding full acceptance in Jesus (**Acts 8:27-29**). Peter challenges anyone to *deny* a Gentile household the right to be baptized, insisting that it was their God-given privilege as faith's way of coming under the saving name of Jesus (**Acts 4:12** with **10:47-48**).

18. If there ever was a time in the NT when a “fuss” was made of baptism it was in that Acts 10 incident when some would have doubted the right of uncircumcised Gentiles to be allowed salvation in Jesus Christ (see **Acts 10** and **Acts 11:1-18** with **15:1**). Peter, in essence, said of this Gentile family, “So, then, in light of all this, is there any one of you prepared to deny these people the right to be baptized?” You hear people today saying, “Believers don’t need to be baptized!” or “I *won’t* be baptized!” Nothing like that ever happens in the New Testament and as Beasley-Murray and others insist, it is inconceivable that it would have.

19. We’re not to make more (or less) of baptism than the NT does. It’s no substitute for God and it’s not the be-all and end-all of our response to God. But the short and the long answer is “yes” to the question: “Is baptism worth talking about?”