

Baptism

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13).

Probably no issue has contributed to more confusion, contention, and divisions in Christendom than baptism. Some churches teach baptism is a sacrament, some that it is necessary for salvation. Some teach infants are to be baptized while others limit baptism to adults. Some teach immersion, some pouring, some sprinkling. Apart from baptism, some churches do not consider you a Christian and some will not let you join the church or teach in the church. What one believes about baptism has a large influence in determining one's church or denomination. To try and remedy this confusion, it is necessary to examine what the Scriptures teach about baptism.

What does baptism mean? The words "baptism" and "baptize" ([βάπτισμα](#), [βαπτισμός](#), and [βαπτίζω](#)) go back to the Greek word [βάπτω](#), "to dip." Homer used it of a brazier who dipped hot brass in water to temper it. In the Old Testament (LXX), βάπτω was used frequently. It was used of the dipping of hyssop in blood during the Passover (Exodus 12.22). The word βαπτίζω is used less frequently, but notably of Naaman who dipped himself seven times in the Jordan river to cleanse himself from leprosy (2 Kings 5.14). This word has a more intransitive sense than βάπτω. It has the sense of "wash" as in "washing oneself". In Hebrews 6.2 and 9.10, we read about "washings" (βαπτισμός) that pertained to the Jews. The sense is cleansing. This sense was carried on by John the Baptizer who preached and performed "the baptism of repentance" (Matthew 3.2-6). About half the references to baptism in the New Testament concern John the Baptizer and this mission. The twelve apostles continued this sense. Thus, Peter declared:

“And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” (1 Peter 3.21).

While baptism has the idea of cleansing, its basic meaning is “identification.” Thus, Jesus said,

“You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (Mark 10.38)?

And again,

“But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12.50).

Paul, describing Israel, wrote:

¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ³ and all ate the same spiritual food; ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ (1 Corinthians 10.1-4).

Paul declared a new, spiritual sense and emphasis for baptism. According to Paul, every believer in Christ is a member of the body of Christ and has been baptized by the Holy Spirit. He wrote,

“For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.13).

³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?

⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, (Romans 6.3-6).

⁹ For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,
¹⁰ and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; ¹¹ and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; ¹² having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Colossians 2.9-12).

⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3.5-7).

What kind of baptism did Paul teach in these passages? Did he mean water baptism or spiritual baptism? Let the reader ask himself the following questions. Can water baptism identify us into the death of Christ? Can it identify us in Christ's resurrection? Can it cause us to walk in newness of life? Can a work of man do these things? These works are beyond the capability of man; they are of God. Paul taught that when one believes his gospel, that Christ died for our sins and rose

from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4), he is baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13). With this act, God identifies the believer with Christ and he becomes a member of the body of Christ, i.e., the Church. God sees him as sharing (being identified) in Jesus' death and resurrection. What an amazing and exciting truth!

What was the role of water baptism in the ministry of John the Baptizer, of Jesus, of the 12 apostles? What do the Scriptures teach?

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1.4).

¹⁵ And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶ He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mark 16.15-16).

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.38).

We should notice a few things from these passages. One, they contain a consistent message from John the Baptizer, Jesus, and Peter. Two, each deals with water baptism. Three, each deals with leaders of Israel and concern a ministry to and out from Israel. Four, each teaches water baptism was necessary for the forgiveness of sins. What are we to make of these Scriptures?

If one takes them at face value, one must conclude they mean what they say, namely, that according to the preaching of John, Jesus, and Peter, forgiveness of sins was based upon repentance, belief that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel (cf. Matthew 16.16; John 11.27), and water baptism. We also read

Ananias words with regard to Paul's salvation:

¹² "A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there,
¹³ came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. ¹⁴ And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. ¹⁵ For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name' (Acts 22.12-16).

Does this mean that salvation was through works? Yes and no.

Salvation has always been through faith. Hebrews 11 makes this clear as do many other passages throughout the Scriptures. While salvation has always been based upon faith, the content of faith has changed over time according to the revelation and the command of God.¹ What did Abraham believe for salvation? Did he believe Christ died for his sins and was raised from the dead for his justification? No, he believed what God revealed to him: he would be the father of many nations, by him the world would be blessed, and God would give him a land (Genesis 12.1-3). Salvation has always been based upon faith in that which God has revealed. What about a Jew during the time of David? How was he saved? He was saved by taking a sacrifice to the priest and by believing that the sacrifice covered his sin. Both had to occur. He could not just have faith and not bring the animal. Nor was providing the animal with no faith sufficient. There had to be both. So both faith and works were necessary.

How does faith work? God provides a revelation. In response, a person says, "I believe it." Faith is obedience. The two cannot be separated. The content of the message of John the

Baptizer, Jesus, and Peter, was the message of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, repentance, and baptism. What was the response of faith and obedience? To repent, be baptized, and believe Jesus was the promised Messiah (cf. Matthew 16.13-19; John 11.26-27; Acts 8.34-38).

Consider the case of Naaman, the Syrian general, who commanded the King of Syria's military forces (2 Kings 5). Elisha told the four-star leprous Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan to be healed. Naaman was angry Elisha had not come out to greet him but had sent his messenger to tell him what to do. He also thought his native rivers were better than the Jordan. From a purely human perspective, Naaman had reason to complain. But in the realm of the divine, human viewpoint means little. Eventually, Naaman was persuaded to do what Elisha had told him. The result: he was healed (2 Kings 5.14). His flesh became like the flesh of a "little child" (עוֹרֵי יְלֵדִים עֲרֻמִּים). Because he obeyed, Naaman had the most beautiful skin of any man in Syria. Faith is believing and obeying what God has revealed. If God told one to do three jumping jacks for salvation, how would faith respond? Faith would respond by doing three jumping jacks.

What is God's revelation today for salvation? Is it repent, be baptized, and believe Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel? No, the content of the gospel has changed. The Lord revealed our gospel to Paul and is called the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). The gospel for today is the following:

¹ Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised

on the third day according to the Scriptures, (1 Corinthians 15.1-4).

What we have to believe, i.e., obey, to be saved today is that Christ died for us and rose from the dead.

We have seen the role baptism played in the ministry of John the Baptizer, Jesus, and Peter. What did Paul write about water baptism? After all, almost all churches today teach some form of water baptism. In his first letter to the Corinthians, one the great issues Paul confronted and wrote to correct was divisions among believers. Paul wrote:

¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void (1 Corinthians 1.14-17).

In addressing the problem of divisions, Paul wrote the Corinthians (c. 57 A.D.) he was glad he had not baptized many so that they might not claim him and let this be a cause of division. This passage rings true. In our mind's eye, we can see Paul dictating the letter. He remembered he baptized Crispus and Gaius and just as his amanuensis recorded his words, he remembered he also baptized Stephanas' household and related that. But the main point to consider is Paul's statement: "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Why did Paul write this? Jesus told his disciples,

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28.19).

Does Paul contradict Jesus? Not at all. How was Paul commissioned as an apostle? Was he commissioned like the Twelve? No. Paul received a special commission from the Lord. God saved Paul on the Damascus road where Jesus, the risen Lord, appeared to him. Jesus did not tell Paul to baptize as he had the other disciples. Jesus gave Paul a different mission from that of the Twelve. The heavenly Lord commissioned Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles while the earthly Lord commissioned Peter and the eleven as apostles to Israel (Acts 9.15-16; 14.26-28; 18.6; 22.21; 26.16-18; 28.28; Galatians 2.2, 7-9; Romans 11.13; Ephesians 3.1, 8; 1 Timothy 2.7). To Paul, the Lord Jesus Christ committed the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24).

A few years later, about 61 A.D., Paul wrote to the Ephesians,

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4.4-6).

Paul's statement has the elements of a creed: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. The common element of the statement is the word "one." Paul wrote there was *one* baptism. What baptism did he mean? From Paul's other teachings, we know he meant spiritual baptism. Paul did not regard water baptism to be of great importance. He wrote the Corinthians, "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 1.17). If only one baptism exists, what baptism is it—the baptism by man or the baptism by God the Holy Spirit? Clearly, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is greater than water baptism performed by man. It is clear that from the time Paul wrote the Corinthians to the time he wrote the Ephesians that water baptism was ending and that by the time he wrote Ephesians it had ceased. Therefore, water baptism has no place in

Christianity. Why do churches practice water baptism?

The short answer to that question is that churches practice water baptism because theologians have failed to recognize and distinguish between Paul's ministry and the revelation God gave to him and the ministry of John the Baptizer, Jesus, and the Twelve. John, Jesus, and the Twelve proclaimed the "gospel of the kingdom of God" (Matthew 4.17; 9.35). Their message was to *Israel*. Its focus was on repentance, water baptism, belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and the earthly kingdom of God. Paul proclaimed a different message. He proclaimed the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24) which focused upon Christ dying for our sins and rising from the dead. It was a message of grace and faith alone (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Paul's gospel was primarily to Gentiles since he was the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13). Failure to understand the differences between these two ministries and messages and failure to distinguish between Israel (God's earthly people) and the Church (God's heavenly people) has led to most of the hermeneutical problems that exist in Christianity. Only when one allows the Scriptures to mean what they say in context rather than reading later revelation into them or forcing them into a preconceived theological position do apparent contradictions vanish. Such methodology is much more successful and enlightening than rationalizing or forcing passages into contorted directions that result in confused or contradictory renderings.

In summary,

- From John the Baptizer to Pentecost there was one baptism—water baptism (Mark 1.4; John 1.31).
- During the period of time recorded in Acts there were two baptisms—water (Acts 2.38) and baptism with or in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.5; 2.38; 1 Corinthians 12.13).
- At the present time there is one baptism (Ephesians 4.5). This is the baptism by which we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6.3-5) and into

His body (1 Corinthians 12.13). This baptism is different from the baptism with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. At Pentecost, Christ was the Baptizer (Matthew 3.11; Acts 1.5). But for Christians, for believers of Paul's gospel, the Holy Spirit is the baptizer. He baptizes us into Christ and his body (1 Corinthians 12.13; Titus 3.5-7).

If water baptism is invalid for our day, there is no need to discuss infant baptism. But since infant baptism is a major part of Christendom one small word will be said. No Scripture supports the idea of infant baptism. Search the Scriptures. It is not there. Furthermore, the notion that baptism is for the New Testament what circumcision was for the Old Testament is a human invention. Not one verse supports this notion. One can only wonder how such teaching began. A chief principle of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*—the Scriptures alone. Tragically, men sacrifice that principle all too willingly to sustain theological biases.

From Paul's teaching, the apostle to the Gentiles, the apostle of the gospel of the grace of God, and the apostle to whom Christ revealed the Church, the body of Christ, comes the knowledge of one baptism: the baptism of the Holy Spirit. By this baptism, we are identified with Christ and placed "in Christ." God the Holy Spirit is the baptizer of believers, not a minister who dips, pours, or sprinkles water on someone. Despite the centuries of history of water baptism and all its attendant traditions, the Scriptures teach baptism of the Holy Spirit is the one legitimate baptism for the Church, the body of Christ.

¹ See also [the Gospel](#).

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