

New Testament Baptism: In Water or the Spirit?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

“How would you respond to those who make the claim that passages such as Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3, 4; Colossians 2:12; 1 Corinthians 12:13, and 1 Peter 3:21 — refer to a ‘Spirit’ baptism, rather than to ‘water’ baptism?”

Some years ago I had a series of public debates with a gentleman who contended that there is no divinely-authorized water baptism today. He claimed that the water baptism specifically mentioned in the book of Acts (e.g., Acts 8:36; 10:47) was merely a Jewish purification ritual.

He further argued that this ceremonial act was terminated with the close of the book of Acts. Therefore, the only baptism in vogue today is a Spirit baptism.

This dogma is quite erroneous, and it can be refuted effectively.

In response, I must first point out that it is generally agreed that whatever the baptism is in those passages that associate the rite with salvation, it is the same type of baptism in **all the verses**.

In other words, the baptism of Matthew 28:19 is of the same kind as that in Acts 2:38, 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; and 1 Peter 3:21.

My debate opponent happily conceded this point.

In view of this, consider the following:

Human Administrators

The baptism mentioned in Matthew 28:19 had **human administrators**.

Christ commissioned the apostles to **go and make disciples**, baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Inasmuch as an apostle could not baptize someone in the Spirit (only Christ could do that — Mt. 3:11), we are forced to conclude that the baptism of Matthew 28:19 is **water baptism**, not Spirit baptism. I am unaware of any reputable Bible scholar who contends otherwise.

If the other passages that mention baptism (see above) are of the same import, then it follows that they likewise refer to water baptism, not Spirit baptism.

Baptism Is Immersion

Both Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12 make it clear that the baptism of these passages involves both an **immersion in something** and **being raised** from the same substance. This makes perfectly good sense if water baptism is in view.

On the other hand, if the element of the baptism is the Spirit, this would imply that we are buried in the Spirit and subsequently **raised from** the Spirit.

This would further suggest that the new convert would not have the Spirit, and therefore, would not belong to the Lord (Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6).

This conclusion obviously is wrong. The element of baptism in Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12 is not the Holy Spirit.

By default, it must be water baptism.

Water Is Specifically Identified With baptism

Water is **specifically** associated with baptism in 1 Peter 3:20-21.

when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls, were **saved through water**: which also after a true likeness doth now save you, **even baptism**

If 1 Peter 3:21 refers to the same sort of baptism as the other passages cited, then clearly they also refer to water baptism.

Baptism Places Us Into the Kingdom

The passage that would come closest to teaching a Spirit baptism would be 1 Corinthians 12:13. But the fact is a careful analysis of related passages reveals that not even this text actually teaches a baptism in the Spirit.

Note the following logic.

- The baptism of 1 Corinthians 12:13 puts one into the one “body,” which is the same as the “church” (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, 24).
- But the church is identified with the kingdom of Christ (Mt. 16:18-19).
- Thus, the baptism of the text under consideration introduces one into the Lord’s kingdom.

However, a related passage demonstrates that it is through the birth of “water” that one enters Christ’s kingdom (Jn. 3:3-5). One is forced to conclude, therefore, that the baptism of 1 Corinthians 12:13 is water baptism.

In this connection, one should also carefully study Ephesians 5:26 and note the reference to the “washing of water.”

Bible Words Are Defined By How They Are Used

Finally, there is a principle of interpretation that is paramount in sound Bible exegesis.

Frequently it is the case that Bible words will form a pattern. When we consider several passages containing a term, we see that the word has a **commonly understood significance**.

Such being the case, that **normal meaning** is to be attached to the term unless an **exceptional context** suggests that it has taken on a **special significance** (i.e., a figurative sense).

The term “baptize” and its cognate “baptism” occur together about 100 times in the New Testament. A consideration of these passages will reveal that the word may, on occasion, take on a figurative application (cf. Mt. 3:11; Lk. 12:50; Acts 1:5).

Unless, though, there is **clear contextual evidence** that a symbolic sense has been employed, the conclusion must be that the common usage (immersion in water) is in view.

In view of this principle, there is no reason to conclude the baptism mentioned in Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12, and 1 Peter 3:21 is anything other than water baptism — an act of obedience, predicated upon faith and repentance, which secures forgiveness of sins and brings one into union with Jesus Christ.

To all of this, we add this point.

The clear cases of water baptism in the book of Acts (chapters 8 and 10) very obviously were not examples of Jewish ritualism. The indisputable fact is that the Mosaic law had been abolished by the cross (Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14), and no Jewish rite was henceforth tolerated in connection with the salvation process (cf. Acts 15:1; Gal. 5:2-4).

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Scripture References

Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3, 4; Colossians 2:12; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 8:36, 10:47; Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; Matthew 3:11; Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6; 1 Peter 3:20-21; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18, 24; Matthew 16:18-19; John 3:3-5; Ephesians 5:26; Luke 12:50; Acts 1:5; Mark 16:16; Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14; Acts 15:1; Galatians 5:2-4

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