The Doctrine of Baptism

All Scriptures are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

Baptism is one of the most widely practiced and debated commands in the New Testament. While nearly all Christian groups practice some form of baptism, few agree on its purpose, administration, or relationship to salvation. Some regard it as a public symbol, others as a mere tradition, and still others as essential for entering the kingdom of God.

This study will examine the origin, meaning, significance, and practice of baptism. It will clarify the biblical teaching about this ordinance and address some common questions and objections.

As we will see, baptism is not an optional ritual; the Bible presents baptism as a command of Jesus Christ that was given to the apostles and obeyed by every convert in the early church. It is a covenant ratification ceremony instituted by God, that is tied directly to repentance, forgiveness, and a new spiritual life in Christ. No one in the New Testament was ever considered a Christian apart from baptism.

The Institution of Baptism

While the New Testament introduces Christian baptism as a new command, the Old Testament often foreshadowed the establishment of this ordinance.

For example, the Law of Moses frequently required various washings to remove ritual impurity and restore a person to fellowship with God. These washings often involved full immersion in water. “And whoever touches the body of the one with the discharge shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening” (Leviticus 15:7). “Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. But the priest shall be unclean until evening” (Numbers 19:7).

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–2, Paul said that the Israelites were “baptized into Moses” when they crossed the Red Sea, which was a symbolic act of deliverance from slavery and separation from Egypt.

The story of Naaman the Syrian, in 2 Kings 5, is another prescient example of baptism. Although Naaman resisted at first, he was not healed of his leprosy until he obeyed the prophet’s command to dip himself in the Jordan River seven times. His healing did not occur when he traveled to Israel, or when Elisha sent a messenger to him, but only when he obeyed the word of the Lord, which is an important lesson for Christians.

These Old Testament examples, and many others, anticipated the New Covenant command of baptism, which was introduced by John and fulfilled by Jesus.

The ministry of John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus and signaled a new era of spiritual renewal. He was the prophesied voice in the wilderness who came to herald the coming of the

kingdom of heaven and prepare the way for the Lord.

Mark 1:4–5 says: John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Although John's baptism was not identical to Christian baptism, since it occurred before the death and resurrection of Christ, it did introduce the idea that immersion in water, combined with repentance, was a necessary act of obedience to God. By doing this, people were acknowledging their guilt and seeking forgiveness. John's ministry laid the foundation for the Christian baptism commanded by Jesus.

Matthew 3:13–17 says that Jesus Himself was baptized, not because He had sinned, but to fulfill all righteousness and set an example for those He came to save. Then, the Holy Spirit descended on Him, and the Father publicly acknowledged Jesus as His Son.

After this, Jesus began making and baptizing disciples; He did not personally baptize people, but His disciples did so under His supervision. “After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing” (John 3:22). “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples)” (John 4:1–2).

After His resurrection, Jesus gave the Great Commission to the church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

This command was not limited to the first generation of believers. It is the church’s mission under the direction of Jesus “to the end of the age.” Baptism was, and remains, a command of Christ for every new disciple. Any church that refuses to follow His directive is teaching error, disobeying the Lord, and cutting itself off from the body of Christ.

The Meaning of Baptism

In the ancient world, baptism was more than a mere ritual; it marked a public association with a teacher, movement, or belief system. Those who were baptized by John associated themselves with his call for repentance. Likewise, to be baptized in the name of Jesus is to openly declare allegiance to Him as Lord and Savior and to associate one’s self with His body, the church.

Baptism is not a private experience. It is a visible act of commitment and submission to Christ. In every case recorded in the New Testament, baptism occurred immediately upon faith and repentance. It marked the boundary between life under sin and life under Christ, and it served as the entry point into the community of redeemed believers.

Paul explained the meaning of baptism in Romans 6:3–4: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the

glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Baptism symbolizes union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. The water represents a grave, where the old life is buried and the new life begins. Baptism is an outward depiction of what God is doing inwardly: putting the old self to death and raising a new creation to life.

In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul makes another important point about baptism: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."

Baptism not only unites a believer with Christ, but also incorporates him into the church, the body of Christ. It is the moment when a disciple becomes a member of God's family. Though many groups treat church membership as separate from baptism, the New Testament joins the two. There is no example of a baptized person who remained apart from the church, nor an unbaptized person who was considered a full member.

The Significance of Baptism

Throughout Scripture, God always established covenants with visible acts: Noah received the sign of the rainbow, Abraham circumcised his household, and Moses sprinkled blood on the Israelites to establish the Old Covenant. Baptism is a ratification ceremony that marks a believer's formal entrance into a New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Baptism marks the formal acceptance of the terms of the New Covenant and the application of New Covenant promises and blessings on a convert.

Paul compared this relationship to marriage. Just as a wedding ceremony ratifies a marriage covenant between a man and a woman, baptism ratifies a believer's union with Christ. Ephesians 5:25–27 says that Christ cleansed the church "by the washing of water with the word." This is not a casual metaphor. It reflects the covenantal meaning behind baptism. To delay or reject baptism is not just disobedience; it is an outright refusal to enter the covenant that Christ offers.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd what they needed to do to be saved: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Scripture promises forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who obey. This is not a promise made to those who merely believe privately, but to those who express that belief through repentance and baptism. "And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:32). Later, Ananias told Saul what he needed to do to be saved: "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16).

In Scripture, baptism is always the moment when a person receives the blessings of the New Covenant: cleansing, forgiveness, and spiritual rebirth. To separate baptism from the Gospel is to divide what God has joined together. "…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 NASB).

Some object that insisting on baptism as necessary for salvation undermines God's grace, but this misses the point. God's grace is not opposed to obedience; it demands obedience. Baptism is not a work that merits salvation; it is the response of faith to a command of Christ.

Naaman was not healed of his leprosy until he obeyed the prophet's command. Likewise, a person has no assurance of forgiveness or eternal life if he knowingly refuses to be baptized. Such willful disobedience is rebellion, and Scripture warns that presumptuous sins, deliberate acts of defiance, cut a person off from God's mercy. "For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:23). "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:26–27).

God may judge differently in cases of ignorance or inability, but when a person has time and opportunity but refuses to obey, he has no assurance of salvation.

The Recipients of Baptism

Throughout the New Testament, baptism is always preceded by repentance and faith. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commanded the apostles to make disciples and baptize them, not infants or unbelievers. Every example of baptism in the book of Acts involves someone who heard the gospel, believed, and responded. "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12).

In Acts 2:38, Peter told those who heard the gospel to "repent and be baptized." This requires moral awareness and the ability to make a lifelong commitment to follow Christ. Infants cannot meet these conditions. Baptism is a response of conscience, not a decision made on another's behalf.

There is no command to baptize infants, no example of it being done, and no teaching in the New Testament that supports this practice. Infant baptism arose later in church history and contradicts the biblical requirement of having faith prior to baptism.

Advocates of infant baptism sometimes point to Acts 16 or 1 Corinthians 1 where an entire household was baptized, but those accounts say nothing about the age or faith of those baptized.

Baptism is not a momentary decision; it is a lifelong commitment to follow God no matter the cost. A disciple must be willing to die for the faith if necessary. Just as marriage requires emotional maturity and personal responsibility, baptism also requires the maturity and ability to understand what sin is, count the cost, and commit to Christ for life.

In Numbers 1:3 and 1 Chronicles 23:24, those who were twenty and older were enrolled for

military or priestly service. While not a strict rule, this suggests that twenty was the accepted age for adult responsibilities and moral accountability. Baptism should never be rushed or performed on someone who is not fully rational and mature.

The Bible suggests that there are times when a person may need to be re-baptized. In Acts 19:1–6, Paul encountered a group of men in Ephesus who had received John's baptism but had not yet heard the full gospel of Jesus Christ. Upon learning this, they were baptized again, this time in the name of the Lord Jesus, and they received the Holy Spirit.

This passage confirms two important truths: first, that baptism must be based on an accurate understanding of the gospel, and second, that it is possible to receive a baptism that is not valid. Rebaptism is appropriate when a person's original baptism did not meet all the biblical requirements.

The Mode of Baptism

The English word "baptism" comes from the Greek verb *baptizō*, which means "to immerse, to dip, or to submerge." Ancient Greek literature used it to describe the sinking of a ship or the dipping of a cloth in dye. It never refers to sprinkling or pouring.

The Bible confirms this meaning. John baptized in the Jordan River, because water was plentiful there and people came "up out of" the water (Mark 1:10; John 3:23). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, they both "went down into the water" and came back out (Acts 8:38). These descriptions are unnecessary unless immersion is the method.

Sprinkling and pouring developed later in church history, often for convenience or in cases of illness, but they do not reflect the original command or practice.

In Romans 6:4, Paul said that "we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death…" Baptism is a symbolic burial. It represents the end of a former life enslaved to sin and the beginning of a new life under the lordship of Christ.

This is why immersion is the only mode that fits the biblical analogy. Sprinkling a few drops of water on someone does not picture a burial, and pouring water on a person's head does not resemble being raised from a grave. According to semantics and biblical symbolism, a true baptism requires full immersion in a watery grave.

Although many churches practice sprinkling or pouring, no such method is found in the New Testament. Every example, every command, and every image associated with baptism assumes immersion.

Sprinkling may resemble some Old Testament cleansing rituals (such as with hyssop or blood), but it does not fulfill the requirements of Christian baptism. To alter the method is to distort both the form and the meaning of what Christ commanded.

The Ordinance of Baptism

Baptism is never administered apart from instruction and faith. A person must first hear the

gospel, understand its message, and commit to follow Christ before baptism. This order is consistent throughout Acts: preaching leads to faith, and faith leads to baptism.

Baptism is not an initiation rite performed in ignorance. It is a conscious response to the truth of the gospel and a pledge of lifelong obedience. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

There is no example in Scripture of self-baptism. In every case, baptism was performed by someone who was already in the church and had the authority to administer the ordinance. Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch at the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:38), Peter baptized Cornelius’s household (Acts 10:48), and Paul baptized the disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus (Acts 19:5–6).

Baptism is not merely a personal act; it is a church ordinance. While Scripture does not limit the act to elders or apostles, it does assume that baptism is performed by someone within the community of faith. It is not a private experience; it is a public, communal declaration of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Scripture teaches that, after baptism, a minister lays his hands on the person and prays for him to receive the Holy Spirit. “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14–17).

Every baptism in the New Testament followed this sequence with one notable exception. God gave the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his household before baptism because Jewish believers were reluctant to accept Gentiles into the church; this only happened once in the entire New Testament, and Peter still required them to be baptized.

So, the normal, biblical pattern for baptism includes the following five elements:

1. A person hears and understands the gospel.
2. He expresses repentance and faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.
3. A minister immerses him in water in the name of Jesus Christ.
4. A minister lays his hands on the person and prays for the Holy Spirit.
5. The new Christian receives the Holy Spirit and is born again.

Baptism is an essential part of God’s plan of salvation, but it is only the first step in a larger spiritual process. It is the moment of covenant ratification, forgiveness, and spiritual rebirth. After baptism, a Christian must engage in a lifetime of overcoming sin and developing holy character aided by the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit.

Problem Passages

Luke 23:43 — The Thief on the Cross

Some argue that baptism cannot be necessary for salvation because Jesus promised paradise to the thief on the cross, who was not baptized. “And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:43).

This example does not disprove baptismal necessity for Christians today.

First, Jesus and John the Baptist had baptized many followers during their ministry; there is simply no way to know if this individual was or was not among them.

Second, even if the thief wanted to be baptized, he did not have the time or opportunity, so he did the only thing he could; he expressed remorse for his actions, confessed his faith in Jesus, and appealed for mercy. Jesus had authority to forgive sins during His earthly ministry, just as He forgave others without any ritual.

Third, Christian baptism was not instituted until after Jesus rose from the dead and gave the Great Commission; the new covenant, with its ordinances and church structure, began at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples.

The example of the thief on the cross cannot be used to nullify what Christ later required of everyone who would follow Him.

1 Corinthians 1:17 — "Christ Did Not Send Me to Baptize"

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul wrote, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel…”

This verse is sometimes cited to argue that baptism is unimportant or unrelated to the gospel. But Paul was not minimizing baptism’s value; he was addressing a problem of division in the Corinthian church. Some members were boasting about who had baptized them (v. 12–16), turning a sacred act into a point of pride and division.

Paul’s point is that his primary role was to preach the gospel, not to personally administer every baptism. Paul had other helpers, like Silas and Timothy, who could baptize new believers; his focus was evangelism. Paul’s letters affirmed baptism’s central role in the Christian life (e.g., Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:27). Baptism was a central part of Paul’s ministry, just as it was under Peter’s leadership.

Ephesians 2:8–9 — "Saved by Grace… Not Works"

In Ephesians 2:8–9, Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Some interpret this to mean that baptism, being a physical action, must be a “work” and therefore excluded from salvation, but this misrepresents the relationship between grace and obedience. Faith, repentance, and baptism are not meritorious deeds that earn salvation; they are the commanded responses to God’s grace.

When Peter preached in Acts 2, he offered the gift of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins, but

he also said, “Repent and be baptized…” (v. 38). That is not legalism; it is obedience to the Lord’s instruction. Baptism is not something we do to earn salvation; it is the moment when we receive what we cannot earn. Grace does not eliminate God’s commandments; it motivates believers to keep God’s laws as a visible demonstration of saving faith.

Mark 16:16 — A Textual Variant?

In Mark 16:16, Jesus is recorded as saying: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

While this verse clearly affirms the necessity of both belief and baptism, it comes from a disputed section of Mark’s Gospel. The earliest manuscripts end at Mark 16:8, and verses 9–20 may have been added later. Because of this, some reject this verse as evidence for baptismal necessity.

While it is wise to be cautious with textual variants, the doctrine of baptismal necessity does not depend on Mark 16:16. This teaching is found in Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3–4, 1 Peter 3:21, and elsewhere. Even if Mark 16:16 were removed, the overall teaching remains unchanged: belief and baptism are the appointed means by which we enter the New Covenant.

Matthew 28:19 — Triune Baptism?

Some have raised concerns about the correct formula for baptism. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus told the church to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Yet in Acts, believers were often baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38; 10:48; 19:5). Is this a contradiction?

The answer is no. Both expressions refer to the same baptism. The phrase “in the name of Jesus” emphasizes the authority and lordship of Christ, while the Trinitarian formula expresses the full identity of God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is no contradiction. When a minister baptizes “in the name of Jesus,” he is acting on behalf of Christ with His authority. Baptism in the name of the Triune God includes baptism in the name of Jesus. The former is sufficient, while the latter is more comprehensive.

There is also no reason to immerse a person three times, once for the Father, again for the Son, and a third time for the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 4:5 clearly states that there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Conclusion

Baptism is central to the message of the apostles, the mission of the church, and the salvation of every believer. Jesus commanded the church to baptize disciples and that is what the early church did. The apostles taught its necessity, and Scripture ties it directly to the forgiveness of sins, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and union with Christ and His body.

Baptism is a mandatory covenant ratification ceremony for every adult who expresses repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. A minister baptizes the believer by immersion in the name

of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; this is followed by the laying on of hands with prayer for the giving of the Holy Spirit. This is not a mere human tradition; it is God's required response to the gospel under the New Covenant.

This study has demonstrated that baptism:

- Was foreshadowed in the Old Testament and instituted by Christ,
- Identifies the believer with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection,
- Is the point at which one enters the New Covenant,
- Must be performed on those capable of repentance and faith,
- Requires full immersion to preserve its meaning and form,
- Must be administered by an authorized agent of the church, and
- Is essential for every disciple who has the time and opportunity to obey.

The New Testament pattern is clear: repent, believe, and be baptized. Any church that teaches otherwise is spreading error and disobeying Christ. Likewise, any individual who knowingly refuses to be baptized is rejecting the Lord's authority and has no assurance of salvation. Willful disobedience is a presumptuous sin. God may judge mercifully in cases of ignorance or situations beyond human control, but no one should presume upon that mercy.

In the Old Covenant, God granted the Holy Spirit to prophets and patriarchs without the ordinance of baptism, but in the New Covenant, baptism is the God-ordained means by which one publicly enters the kingdom of God and receives its promised blessings.

The original command given by Peter on Pentecost remains unchanged: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

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Published by Didactic Ministries

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