

Water Baptism

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Water baptism, according to the Bible, is an important act of obedience for all who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. If we are going to have a proper understanding of its importance, we must study the Scriptures to comprehend how water baptism fits into God's purposes for those who believe.

When the word "baptism" is used in the Bible, water baptism is not always the act to which the author is referring. The Greek word translated "baptize" means to "immerse or submerge." *I Corinthians 12:13* is a good example of the use of the word "baptized" when it does not refer to the ceremony of water baptism. In this passage the Spirit is the Agent with which or in which the believer is baptized, not water. The Greeks used the word translated "baptized" to refer to the act of fully immersing anything or anyone in such a way that the thing or person being baptized became one with the immersing agent. Thus, the Greek word for baptism had an expanded meaning and usage that spoke of a union or of being made one with something else in such a way that, in essence, it constituted a new beginning. This is how the word is used in *I Corinthians 12:13*. Every believer has been made one with and in the Spirit. Our union with the Holy Spirit makes all who believe in Jesus one with each other. We are united together as one body in Christ

by the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit to the Church that officially began at Pentecost in the upper room.

Acts 1:4, 5 and *Ephesians 4:3 - 6* both speak of this one baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit that formed the spiritual body of Christ, the Church, on the day of Pentecost. The mystical and spiritual formation and equipping of the Church took place on that day there in the upper room once and for all. Something new began that day that had never existed before. The mystical body of Christ was formed and equipped. That baptism included all of us who believe during this dispensation of Grace. The baptism by the Holy Spirit is a corporate baptism of all who believe that took place at the beginning of this Church Age. Individual believers today should seek to be filled with the Spirit, but individuals do not need to seek to be “baptized” with the Spirit because upon being born again, they are instantly made one with the Spirit and are members of the Body of Christ that was baptized at Pentecost.

Since God recognizes only one baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit that effectually makes us one with Himself, water baptism must be understood to be only a symbol of that one true baptism. We will discover that water baptism is highly symbolic of many things. Identification or membership in the body of Christ, spiritual cleansing, death and resurrection and new life are just a few of the glorious works of God’s grace that are symbolized by the ceremony of water baptism.

Many emphatically teach that water baptism is

part of a formula for salvation that may include any number of additional requirements such as the receiving of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues and/or a continual life of godly service. According to those who promote such formulas for salvation, if any part of their formula is missing, the individual is not saved and will be eternally lost. Water baptism, the infilling of the Holy Spirit and godly service are certainly part of God's plan for every believer, but if we fabricate a formula that includes water baptism and/or the infilling of the Holy Spirit and/or our faithfulness to live godly and/or anything else as a means of salvation, we are grossly diluting the work of Christ on the cross and are proclaiming a message of justification by works rather than a message of justification by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Let's consider the four principal verses in Scripture that are misinterpreted by some to justify their erroneous teaching that baptism in water is essential for salvation.

Please, read **Acts 2:21, 37, 38**. These verses tell us what is the proper course of action for one who believes. Every individual should call upon the Lord, repent of their sin, be baptized and receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. The phrase in **Acts 2:38** "*be baptized...for the remission of sins*" is the phrase that many say clearly states that water baptism is essential for salvation. The Greek word translated "for" can mean either "as the means of" or "on the basis of" or "because of." The phrase can accurately be translated, "repent of your sins and because they have been forgiven, be baptized." The construction

of the sentence in the Greek also indicates that the command to repent and the result of the forgiveness of your sins are linked by the use of their plural forms whereas the command, “be baptized” is in the singular form and therefore is parenthetical and separate from the rest of the sentence.

Though an understanding of the grammatical technicalities of the Greek is important, we are not left to base our beliefs solely on these technicalities. Whenever we come across difficult passages in the Bible we must learn to understand them in the light of other, clearer passages that leave no room for misunderstanding the doctrine in question. When we consider other sermons by Peter and by the other preachers in the book of Acts in which they proclaim the offer of the forgiveness of sins, they mentioned only faith as the condition of salvation and make no mention of water baptism. (*Acts 10:43; 13:38, 39; 26:18*)

I Peter 3:20 - 22 is another passage that many point to as evidence that the Bible teaches that water baptism is essential for salvation. In *I Peter 3* Peter is exhorting believers to maintain a good conscience through godly living in the face of severe persecution and opposition. (*I Peter 3:16*) In Peter’s day baptism in water, in Jesus’ name, marked you as a target for persecution and even death, but that very testimony of water, symbolized the salvation of the believer. The following is an excerpt from the **Bible Knowledge Commentary** published by the Dallas Theological Seminary that I believe accurately explains the meaning of Peter’s words in this passage.

“Noah is presented as an example of one who committed himself to a course of action for the sake of a clear conscience before God, though it meant enduring harsh ridicule. Noah did not fear men but obeyed God and proclaimed His message. Noah's reward for keeping a clear conscience in unjust suffering was the salvation of himself and his family, who **were saved through** water, being brought safely through the Flood.

3:21. And this (ho, relative pronoun - "water" is the understood antecedent) water symbolizes baptism (*baptisma*). Baptism represents a complete break with one's past life. As the Flood wiped away the old sinful world, so baptism pictures one's break from his old sinful life and his entrance into new life in Christ. Peter now applied to his readers the principle he set forth in verses 13-17 and illustrated in verses 18-20. He exhorted them to have the courage to commit themselves to a course of action by taking a public stand for Christ through baptism. The act of public baptism would "save" them from the temptation to sacrifice their good consciences in order to avoid persecution. For a first-century Christian, baptism meant he was following through on his commitment to Christ, regardless of the consequences.

Baptism does not save from sin, but from a bad conscience. Peter clearly taught that baptism was not merely a ceremonial act of physical purification, **but (*alla*, making a strong contrast) the pledge (*eperotema*, also trans. "appeal"; cf. NASB) of a good conscience (*syneideseos*; cf. v. 16) toward God.** Baptism is the symbol of what has already occurred in the heart and life of one who has trusted Christ as Savior (cf. Rom 6:3-5; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12). To make the source of salvation perfectly clear Peter added, by **the resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Peter 1:3).**”

The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Mark 16:16 emphasizes that mental, intellectual consent is not enough. Anyone that truly believes would not be afraid to be baptized and branded as a Christian. But notice that unbelief is what brings condemnation, not lack of baptism. *“He who does not believe will be condemned.”* One who truly believes will be willing to publicly express his faith through the testimony of water baptism in Jesus’ name if such an opportunity is afforded him or her.

In **Acts 22:16** Paul is summarizing his conversion experience. He is not attempting to give every detail nor is he giving an in-depth teaching on how to be saved. The sentence structure indicates the *“wash away your sins”* is accomplished by *“calling on the name of the Lord”* not by being baptized. In his *Expanded Translation of the New Testament*, Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest translates this verse: *“Having arisen, be baptized and wash away your sins, having previously called upon His Name.”* The reference to baptism washing away sins is a reference to the symbolism of baptism that points to the work of the washing of regeneration that takes place by the work of the Holy Spirit when the individual puts their faith in Jesus Christ. (**Titus 3:4 – 7**) An examination of all the accounts of Paul’s conversion reveal that he surrendered his heart to Christ on the road to Damascus, was healed and filled upon being prayed for by Ananias and was then baptized in water. Paul could not have been filled with the Holy Spirit if he had not already been forgiven and saved and made one of God’s children. Salvation is required before the Spirit can be received in His fullness. (**John**

14:17 / Acts 2:38, 39) Since he was not baptized in water until after he was filled, we understand that his baptism was not necessary for his salvation.

We have considered the four passages of Scripture that many point to as teaching that water baptism is essential for salvation. (**Acts 2:38 / I Peter 3:20 – 22 / Mark 16:16 / Acts 22:16**) A closer examination of the Greek language and of the context of these verses has revealed that water baptism is simply the outward expression and symbolism of the saving work of God's grace that is accomplished in those who believe in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

In addition to the proper understanding of those four passages we have the overwhelmingly clear and numerous doctrinal statements by the Apostle Paul and the other New Testament writers on the subject of salvation and what man must do in order to be justified before God and have eternal life. To interpret these four passages to mean that water baptism is essential for salvation would be to deny the authority of all the rest of the New Testament Scriptures.

Let's consider just a few of the numerous Scriptures that clearly and emphatically teach that justification is by faith and faith alone in the sacrificial death of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our salvation, or our right standing with God, is a matter of atonement, that is, a price paid that peace might be made. Salvation is a matter of redemption, being bought out of bondage. **Hebrews 9:22, 26** declares that there is no remission or forgiveness of sins except by the shedding of blood. Water cannot

wash away the stain of sin, only faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ is sufficient to cleanse my heart of sin. By the sacrifice of Himself, Jesus put away our sin once for all. **Revelation 1:5, 6** states that Jesus washed us from our sins by His blood and not that we cleansed ourselves from our sin through water baptism. **I John 1:7** tells us that Jesus' blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness. **Ephesians 1:6, 7** leaves no room for confusion about the source, instrument and agent of our redemption or forgiveness of sins. These blessings are received only by and through the blood of Jesus Christ. **Colossians 1:14, 20** reveals that our redemption and peace with God are by the blood. **I Peter 1:18, 19** makes known that we are bought with the blood of Christ.

These are just a few of the Scriptures that deal with redemption and forgiveness. There are many more that deal with other aspects of our salvation. None of these verses that were written to expound in detail the truth of our redemption and salvation mention anything about water baptism or ascribe to it any power to wash away sin. If it were essential for forgiveness, as is the shed blood of Christ, it would have been emphatically taught in these passages as essential.

How is this forgiveness, based on the atoning power of the blood of Christ, received by the individual? By faith! (**Acts 10:43, 48**) The Gentiles in the house of Cornelius to whom Peter preached the merits of Christ's sacrifice, believed that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient to save them from their sins. God seeing faith in their heart, where the work of

regeneration takes place, gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit that is reserved only for His children (**John 14:17** - *world can't receive*) with the evidence of speaking in tongues. With such evidence of the reality of the inner work of salvation having been done in the heart of these Gentiles, Peter declared the foolishness of forbidding them the outward testimony of water baptism that symbolizes the believer's membership in the body of Christ by the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. According to **Acts 8:35 - 38** being saved by faith is a requirement for genuine eligibility to be baptized in water in Jesus' name. Clearly, water baptism is not the means of salvation, but rather it is the public declaration of having been saved by faith.

The letter to the Romans is the Apostle Paul's treatise on the subject of justification before God that brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life. If there was ever a time for the Holy Spirit to clarify that water baptism was essential for salvation, when He inspired the Apostle of this Church Age to write to the Romans would have been the perfect time. **Romans 10:9 - 13** sums up the matter of how one is saved. Faith in the heart, that causes us to say what God says about our sinfulness and about Christ's atoning sacrifice, brings salvation. Over and over again the Bible teaches that we are saved by faith in the sacrifice of Christ. It is a spiritual matter, a spiritual birth. Eternal life is not obtained by external works or ceremonies of any kind. Water baptism does not complete your faith it only expresses it in a graphic, public manner. The thief on the cross was

promised a home in heaven though he never had the opportunity to be baptized. (*Luke 23:42, 43*) Only those washed from the guilt of their sin will be allowed in Heaven. The guilt of the sins of the thief crucified at Jesus' side was washed away, not by water, but by faith in the merits of the sacrifice of Christ.

The few times that water baptism appears to be used in Scripture synonymously with salvation or the forgiveness of sins, we must understand it to mean that baptism is the proper outward testimony to an inner work that has already been accomplished by faith in the atoning power of the blood of Christ. Our boast is in the cross of Jesus Christ and not in any ceremony that we can perform. (*Galatians 6:14*)

Why then is the outward testimony of water baptism so important if it is not essential for salvation? Clearly the example and teaching of Scripture is that every believer should be baptized if the opportunity and means are available. It is a public declaration concerning your past, present and future. It is to mark a turning point in your life. (*Acts 2:37, 38 / Mark 16:16, Acts 22:16 / Acts 8:35 – 38 / Acts 10:43, 48) Acts 16:30 - 33* clearly indicates that it is not necessary for believers to go through a long course of studies before they can be baptized. With only the clear instruction of the need to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and on the basis of their confession, believers should be given immediate access to the public ceremony of water baptism.

It has often been correctly said that water baptism is to the New Testament what circumcision was to the

Old. Circumcision was an outward sign of a spiritual work. It identified the Jew as one who had received special favor from God and marked him, before man, as belonging to God. Water baptism does the same for the Christian. In **Romans 4:1 - 12** we read that circumcision did not make Abraham righteous, his faith did. Circumcision was an external witness of his faith in God's ability to keep His promise. **James 2:20 - 26** appears to contradict Paul's statements in **Romans**, but upon studying the context of both passages we find that there is no contradiction. Paul speaks of justification before God and James speaks of justification before man. God sees the heart. Man sees our actions. True faith leads to obedience and public testimony.

The Jews had corrupted the practice and understanding of circumcision to the point that they ascribed to the ceremony a power and meaning that God had never given circumcision. They falsely taught that being circumcised gave them a right standing with God. As long as they were circumcised, they considered themselves justified before God. Even in the Old Testament God emphasizes the importance of the inner work of the heart as being more important than the outward sign of circumcision. (**Deuteronomy 10:16 / 30:6** **Jeremiah 4:4**) In this Church Age, for all who are in Christ, circumcision has been done away with as a symbol of belonging to God. (**Galatians 5:6 / 6:15**) For the believer in Christ, water baptism is the public ceremony that declares our understanding that we are the children of God by faith in the grace of God that

provided for us eternal redemption through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Today, many Christians have corrupted the understanding of water baptism the same way that the Jews corrupted the understanding of circumcision. Paul warned against the danger of giving water baptism a place and meaning that God has not given it. In *I Corinthians 1:13 - 18* Paul says that he purposely refrained from personally baptizing those saved under his ministry for two reasons. 1) He did not want anyone to think that he was baptizing them to himself as members of “his” church. 2) He did not want undue attention brought to the act of baptizing as if it brought salvation rather than faith in the work of the cross. He was sent to preach the merits of the cross, not the merits of baptism.

What exactly are we publicly declaring by submitting ourselves to water baptism? The visual symbolism of water baptism is a very graphic demonstration of several wonderful, spiritual truths, some of which we have already touched on. We have already seen that water baptism is symbolic of our baptism by the Spirit as a member of the body of Christ. We enter the water and are washed just as we have already entered into the unity of the Spirit and been washed of our sins by His work of regeneration. (*I Corinthians 12:13 / Titus 3:4 – 7*)

The ceremony of water baptism is also symbolic of our identification with Jesus Christ and His death, burial and resurrection that resulted in our total deliverance from the penalty, power and presence of sin. (*Romans 6:1 – 13*) To submit to water baptism

is to publicly declare your identification with Jesus Christ. His death is your death to sin symbolized as you fall into the water. His burial is your burial symbolized as you are plunged under the water. And His resurrection is your resurrection symbolized as you rise up out of the water. When He died, the penalty of your sin was paid. When He was buried the old creation was declared by God to be dead and powerless. When He arose, He arose to live unto God and to give us new life to be able to also live unto God.

The symbolism covers the full deliverance from sin, it's penalty, power and ultimately its very presence. The old life of sin is dead and the new life of Christ is alive and ready and able to please God. (*Galatians 2:20*)

To submit to water baptism is to declare that you are a member of the body of Christ by faith in the atonement of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and that it is your desire to live a life that's pleasing to God. By being baptized in Jesus' name you are expressing your desire to serve Him all the days of your life. Water baptism is a serious matter and should not be taken lightly. It is the proper expression of your faith in the redemption of your soul by the blood of Jesus Christ.

I don't encourage anyone to confess Christ as their Savior unless they are serious with God. True repentance is part of faith. It is not enough just to want to escape hell. It is an intense desire to be delivered from sin in order to serve the living God. Likewise I don't encourage anyone to be baptized

unless they are serious about wanting to learn to live a life that's pleasing to God and that identifies you as a child of God. Water baptism served to seal the martyrdom of many believers in the past and even today in some places around the world water baptism in Jesus' name marks the believer for persecution and death. Water baptism has lost the stigma in our society that it once had and has become a fashionable religious ceremony. Would we be baptized if it meant being targeted for persecution or murder? The fact is, living a godly life in this present evil world is not fashionable. Are we willing to live righteously, though it brings suffering? Submitting to water baptism declares that you are. A saving faith will lead you to the obedience of being baptized in water, in Jesus' name.

Finally, we will consider in whose name we should baptize. In *Matthew 28:18 – 20* Jesus told His disciples to make disciples of all the nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, these same disciples and later the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts are always recorded as having baptized only in Jesus' name. (*Acts 2:38 / Acts 8:16 / Acts 10:47, 48 / Acts 19:5 / Acts 22:16*) Were they not listening? Did they not understand? We know that after the day of Pentecost, the disciples understood far more clearly and more fully the will and purpose of Christ than they ever did during Jesus' earthly ministry. (*John 16:12–15*) Therefore, we must understand that their baptizing believers only in Jesus' name was not a contradiction or act of disobedience to Jesus' command in *Matthew 28:18 – 20*.

There are a couple of plausible explanations that may explain the apparent contradiction between Jesus' command and the practice of the disciples. We know that the Gospel of *Matthew* is Jewish in nature, revealing Jesus as the King of the Jews. It is possible that the method of *Matthew 28:18 – 20* will be the method used during the Kingdom Age when Israel will evangelize the nations and that Jesus never meant it to be used during this Church Age. I personally am not fully satisfied with this explanation because I believe that Peter and the other disciples were, early in the book of *Acts*, still making an offer of the Kingdom to the Jews and would have therefore used the method of *Matthew 28:18 – 20* in *Acts 2.38* if they understood it to be a “kingdom” method. Nevertheless, it is possible that the disciples clearly understood that the nation of Israel was not going to respond to their offer of the kingdom and therefore never used the “kingdom” method to baptize believers.

Another possible explanation, and the one I prefer, may be found in the truth that “Jesus” is the name that gives us access to the Trinity and that represents the authority of the Godhead during this Age of the Church. Jesus came to do the will of the Triune God and is the Representative of the Trinity and the Mediator between God and man and therefore is the “name” in which we are to be baptized and that carries the full authority of the Triune God. (*1 Timothy 2:5, 6*) *“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles*

of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.” **Colossians 2:8 – 10 NKJV**

Though neither of these explanations may fully satisfy our intellect for the apparent discrepancy between Jesus’ command to the disciples in **Matthew** to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and their practice of baptizing only in Jesus’ name in the book of **Acts**, we can find confidence in baptizing only in Jesus’ name based on other Scriptural evidence.

In this Church Age it is the will of the Triune God that the name of Jesus be exalted above every name because of His obedience to carry out the will of the Godhead by dying for the sins of the human race. (**Philippians 2:5 – 11**) The Apostle Paul, the Apostle to the Church, declared in **Colossians 3:17** that “*whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*” NKJV With this clear injunction by the Spirit, and the revelation of the will of the Father to exalt the name of His Son, and with the precedent-setting example of the practice of the Apostles in the book of **Acts**, we confidently baptize in Jesus’ name.

May we be faithful to publicly proclaim our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection not only through the ceremony of water baptism in Jesus’ name, but by a life that is characterized by godliness and obedience to the will of God.

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