



Believer's Baptism

Before ascending into heaven, the risen Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His church in Matthew 28:18-20 with the following statement of purpose:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.

Obedience to that single command, to *make disciples*, requires the church to baptize new converts and teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded. Thus, the ordinance of baptism is the ritual that provides entry into the church. Since only someone who is baptized may become a member of a local church, it's important to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism.

Defining Baptism

The word *baptize* is first used in the New Testament in Matthew 3:1-17 in association with the ministry of John the Baptist. John's baptism was based on the religious symbolism of Gentile proselyte baptism, whereby a Gentile sought to associate himself with the Jewish community. Gentile proselytes submitted to a ritual washing (a full-body, ceremonial bath) called *proselyte baptism*. The ritual testified to the defilement of being a Gentile; his sin and ignorance needed to be washed away so he could receive a new identity and enter into new life in the Jewish community.

Proselyte baptism provided John the Baptist with the conceptual imagery for his baptism ministry. John called all people to repent of their sins, Jew and Gentile alike, to prepare themselves for the Messiah's arrival (cf. Acts 19:4). His baptism symbolized disassociation with the former life, which meant, like a Gentile proselyte, a person had to acknowledge his sin and defilement, his need for cleansing.

John the Baptist baptized those who humbled themselves by immersing them in water. The word *baptize* comes from the Greek verb *baptizō*, which originally referred to the sinking of a ship, or to drowning at sea. The concept of full immersion in water stayed with the word *baptizō* from the classical era into New Testament times. That's why John baptized in the Jordan River where "water was plentiful" (John 3:23).

Just as proselyte baptism provided the conceptual imagery for the baptism ministry of John the Baptist, John's baptism likewise provided the conceptual framework for Christian baptism. Christian baptism is practiced in the same manner, by full immersion in water. Luke records Philip's baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch following his profession of faith in Christ in Acts 8:38-39: "they both went down into the water...he baptized him...they came up out of the water."

Understanding Baptism

Christian baptism is an external symbol to illustrate internal spiritual realities. At its essence, the picture is of a death, burial, and resurrection, and as such it points to several realities that are true for every Christian.

1. Baptism pictures the washing away of sins and the commitment to break with the old life and pursue new life in Christ (Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21).
2. Baptism points to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, promised in the New Covenant (Matt. 3:11; John 1:33).
3. Baptism symbolizes the union with Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27).
4. Baptism points to the incorporation of every believer into the body of Christ, uniting him with every other believer (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:5).

Everything illustrated by water baptism happened prior to the realities symbolized. That is why the risen Lord Jesus Christ chose baptism as the professing Christian's first act of obedience; it's the perfect ritual to symbolize the rich truths of his conversion.

Clarifying Baptism

How is salvation accomplished?

Salvation is wholly of God, by His grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Since sinners are dead in trespasses and sins, no spiritual life exists (Eph. 2:1-3). The sinner is therefore unable and unwilling to seek God (Rom. 8:5-8). Therefore, God must initiate and accomplish the sinner's salvation.

The work of salvation begins by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8; Tit. 3:5). The Spirit causes the sinner to be born again, imparting new spiritual life that enables him to discern his true condition, repent of his sin, and seek Jesus Christ in faith.

Faith is the first breath of his new spiritual life, and by faith all the spiritual blessings of God's saving grace flow to the repentant sinner.

What about Acts 2:38?

Because of what the Bible teaches about the nature of salvation—it is an internal work of the Spirit, wholly by God's grace, apart from human work—baptism is a physical act of obedience that pictures salvation, but it in no way contributes to salvation. Some have mistakenly interpreted Peter's words in Acts 2:38 to teach the opposite (i.e., that it results in salvation). To a remorseful crowd, under conviction for the sin of crucifying Christ, Peter commanded in Acts 2:38, "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."

Peter was not teaching salvation by human works, that repentance and baptism resulted in salvation. Rather, he was calling the repentant to follow through with repentance and baptism, external evidences of internal repentance. By their complete change of mind regarding Jesus Christ (i.e., repentance), they were demonstrating a heart of faith, the channel of God's gracious forgiveness. Salvation came to them, as those called of God (v. 39), by sovereign grace; their baptism demonstrated their true conversion, a total change of heart.

By way of example, the conversion of the Gentiles through Peter's ministry illustrates the proper order of salvation and water baptism. In Acts 10, the spiritual baptism of the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles at the moment of their salvation (vv. 34-46), and in response to their salvation, Peter commanded that they be physically baptized in water (vv. 47-48).

What about other "baptisms"?

The concept of baptism (i.e., full immersion) is used as a metaphor throughout the New Testament to picture spiritual realities. In fact, most uses of the term *baptism* don't refer to water baptism, but rather as a metaphor to portray union or close association.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Matt. 3:11 John tells the crowd Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Neither of those are references to water baptism. The baptism of fire is for unrepentant sinners who reject Christ and will one day be immersed in fiery judgment of eternal hell (v. 12). But the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5) is for repentant believers who receive the New Covenant promise of the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation.

Baptized into Someone. To be baptized into someone, or in someone's name, means to be in union with that person, becoming a full beneficiary of his ministry. Three people are mentioned in that regard—Moses (1 Cor. 1:2), Paul, (1 Cor. 1:13, 15), and Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27). Union with Moses was limited by the nature of his mediatorial role, as union with Paul would be limited to the nature of his role (although Paul eschewed baptism into his name). To be immersed into Christ, however, means spiritual union with Him that guarantees every spiritual blessing (cf. Eph. 1:3).

Baptized into Something. In Mark 10:38-39 (cf. Luke 12:50) Jesus discussed with James and John the suffering He would soon endure through the cross. He used metaphors to indicate the thoroughness of His suffering; it would be both a cup He would drink (internal) as well as a baptism He would undergo (external). Another reference to being baptized into something is in 1 Cor. 12:13, where Paul says the Holy Spirit baptizes believers into one body. That refers to the common union every believer shares with one another in Christ through the church.

Practicing Baptism

The New Testament clearly portrays both John's baptism and Christian baptism as an immersion into water (cf. John 3:23; Acts 8:38-39). The symbol of Christian baptism was fitting only for those who had believed and by the Holy Spirit had been united to Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. That was the pattern practiced by the early church in obedience to Christ's command in Matt. 28:19 (cf. Acts 2:41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16).

According to Matt. 28:18-20, those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and come forward for baptism are those who have apprehended the authority and exclusivity of Jesus Christ (v. 18), the triune nature of God (v. 19), and the fundamental nature of Christian discipleship (v. 20). By obedience to this clear command, a new convert gives public testimony to salvation by faith in Jesus' name, and to his commitment to a life of repentance and obedience to His lordship.