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# What Baptism Will God Accept?

A STUDY OF THE  
BIBLICAL DOCTRINE  
OF BAPTISM



By  
Kyle Pope

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**A Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Baptism**

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## What Baptism Will God Accept?

**B**aptism is taught among all who proclaim to believe in Jesus. Yet many teach different things about its method, purpose and significance. In this study we will consider what the Bible teaches about this very important subject.

### Baptism Before the New Testament

Baptism as a religious ordinance is taught only in the New Testament. While ceremonial washings were a part of the Law of Moses, there is nothing exactly like baptism within its requirements. A type of baptism developed during the period between the Old and New Testament as an initiation for Gentile converts to Judaism. The *Babylonian Talmud*<sup>1</sup> indicates that in addition to circumcision and temple sacrifice a convert was baptized. The text claimed

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<sup>1</sup> The *Babylonian Talmud* is a collection of rabbinical teachings that was written down in the centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem. Although it was written after the New Testament it records some traditions which predate it.

- “He immerses himself and when he comes up he is in all respects an Israelite” (*Yebamoth* 47a, 30).

One sect of the Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem in the Dead Sea settlement at Qumran practiced a baptismal ritual to initiate members into their community (*Manual of Discipline* ii, 25-iii 12). The Jewish historian Josephus (ca. 38-100 A.D.) tells of a sect known as the Essenes<sup>2</sup> who practiced purifying cold-water baths as a regular ritual (*War of the Jews* II, xii 5). Josephus himself early in his life followed a teacher named Bannus and practiced similar cold-water rituals (*Life* ii).

## The Baptism of John

Similar to these customs of baptismal initiation and cleansing the first time the Bible refers to baptism as a religious ordinance is that which was taught by the prophet John. Mark 1:4 teaches - “**John came**

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<sup>2</sup> When Qumran was first excavated in the 1940's and 50's it was assumed that the Essenes lived there. Many scholars currently question this initial identification.

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**baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” (NKJV). The purpose of John’s message was preparation. John came in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy - “...Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.’” (Malachi 3:1 from Mark 1:2,3).**

Although it is commonly taught in the religious world that John’s baptism was the same as the baptism which Christ taught, the Bible indicates that they are quite different. In Acts 19:1-6, years after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension the Apostle Paul met some Jews who had followed John. They had received John’s baptism but had not been baptized into Christ. Paul taught them - “...John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” (19:4). The next verse of the text then tells us - “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus..”

Some important points can be seen from this:

1. The two baptisms were different, or there would have been no need for them to be baptized into Christ.
2. It was imperative that they receive the *right* baptism. Sincere intentions were not enough. Nor was any type of baptism enough. The authority had to be correct (i.e. “in the name of the Lord Jesus”) and the purpose had to be right (i.e. not simply a baptism of repentance). John’s baptism called upon people who were Jews to return in repentance back to God. It was, as Mark 1:4 tells us “for the remission of sins” in the same sense that under the Law of Moses repentance always gave to the Israelite forgiveness of sins (cf. Ezekiel 18:30).

## **The Baptism of Christ**

While John’s message was one of preparation Jesus’ message was one of radical change. He taught - **“...I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”** (John 14:6). Jesus brought a message of a new faith and a new birth.

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He told Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish council - **“...Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** (John 3:3). This grand vision was more than a call to prepare and modify one’s life, but a demand to die spiritually and live again.

Let us consider a few points about the baptism which Christ taught. In Matthew 28:16-20 the Holy Spirit records for us Jesus’ final words while on earth. In what is referred to as the **“Great Commission”** Jesus commands - **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.”** (28:19-20). We see in this text that baptism was commanded and connected with making disciples.

In Acts chapter two we can see how, only a few days later, the Apostles fulfilled the commission they had been given. As they had been promised, the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles in power and allowed them to speak in other languages. This en-

abled them to teach people from many other nations who had come to Jerusalem to worship in their native tongue. The Apostle Peter standing up in the midst of the Apostles, preached the first sermon of the Christian age. After teaching them about Jesus' death and resurrection, at the conclusion of the lesson the people who heard the sermon asked - **“What shall we do”** (2:37). We should note the answer they are given. The text reads - **“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’”** (Acts 2:38, NKJV). In teaching this Peter was obedient to the charge he had been given to make disciples baptizing them into Christ.

## **False Doctrines Regarding Acts Two**

There are a number of false doctrines that are taught about Peter's teaching. First, it is sometimes suggested that Peter's instructions regarding baptism were to the Jews alone. We should note however, that Peter declares in the next verse- **“For the promise**



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is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” (Acts 2:39). With these words Peter includes all mankind in his instructions.

Further, it is sometimes taught that baptism is something which simply joins a person to a local congregation. The text says - **“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”** (Acts 2:41). A few verses later the text adds - **“...the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved”** (Acts 2:47). This shows that it is the Lord, not baptism that adds people to His church. In addition to this, we know from the text that many of those who heard this lesson were from other nations who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost (see Acts 2:5-11). Those who responded were added to the Lord’s church universally, not simply the church in Jerusalem.

## The Purpose of Baptism

The pivotal question regarding the baptism that is taught in the New Testament is what was its purpose? Some argue that after a person is already a Christian they are baptized as “an outward sign of an inward grace.” The Bible teaches something quite different.

In Acts chapter twenty-two the Apostle Paul recounts his own conversion. While traveling on the road to Damascus the Lord spoke to him in a blinding light. The text tells us that Jesus identified Himself to Paul (v. 8), Paul refers to Jesus as Lord, asks what he should do and is told to go into Damascus where he will be told what to do (v. 10). Many have falsely concluded that Paul was saved on the road to Damascus. That is not what the Bible teaches. The text tells us that Paul went into the city and waited (three days - Acts 9:9). After this a Christian named Ananias came to him and taught him (vss. 12-15). At the conclusion of his lesson he said to Paul - **“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash**

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away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16). Paul could not have been saved on the road to Damascus if three days later he was told to be baptized in order to “wash away” his sins calling on the Lord.

## Descriptions of Baptism

Much can be discerned about the purpose of baptism by an examination of the descriptions of it that are given in the New Testament. Consider three descriptions:

- **Burial with Christ.** In Romans 6:4 it is referred to a burial into the death of Christ. This indicates that it is the way in which we die to our old life and are united with the death of Jesus.
- **Putting on Christ.** Galatians 3:27 teaches that in baptism one puts on Christ. If baptism clothes one in Christ, it is clear that before baptism one has not put on Christ.
- **An Appeal to God for a Good Conscience.** I Peter 3:21 draws a comparison between the salva-

tion of Noah through the waters of the flood and baptism. Peter writes - “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, NASB). One does not appeal for something which they already possess. That means that one cannot have a good conscience before baptism. This text shows clearly that baptism is necessary for salvation by stating emphatically “baptism now saves you.”

### **The Method of Baptism**

The word baptism has been transliterated from the Greek language into English. A literal translation of the word would be “immersion.” Bauer, Arnt & Gingrich in their *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* define the word - “*dip, immerse, wash, plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm or soak*” (p. 131). The Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament used in the time of Christ) uses the word

which we translate “baptize” in II Kings 5:14. This text tells of a Syrian commander who was healed of leprosy when he “dipped” (i.e. was baptized) seven times in the Jordan river. It is clear that baptism is a complete submerging in water.

An accurate definition of baptism is significant for a number of reasons. First, baptism is symbolic of a burial (see Romans 6:1-6). Any method which may be called baptism, yet fails to symbolize a burial is not baptism. Second, when the Bible gives us an example of a person being baptized it says that they “**went down into the water**” (Acts 8:38) and then “**came up out of the water**” (Acts 8:39). Only if immersion is going to be administered would it be necessary for one to go down into water and then come up out of the water. Third, “baptism” refers to a specific action - immersion. To be obedient to an instruction to perform a specific action a person must perform that action. Doing a different action is not obeying the instruction.

## Human Substitutions

Many churches have abandoned immersion and substituted other methods which are, by definition not baptism. Sprinkling or pouring water over a person's head has been called baptism. The problem is that there is not a single command, example or inference which teaches this method of baptism.

Sprinkling has its origins in the imagination of men. The first known reference to sprinkling comes in the century after the New Testament was written. A work known as the *Didache* (or *Teachings*) outlines procedures for baptism. The text reads - "Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm." (7.1-2, Lightfoot). We note that the first and most preferable method is immersion, although the writer expresses some preferences about the type of water and temperature. The next line in the text continues - "But if thou hast neither, then pour water on the head thrice in

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the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (7.3). Here we see an uninspired writer offering a substitution which was never authorized in the New Testament. From this kind of thinking began the man-made tradition of sprinkling instead of immersion.

### What Difference Does It Make?

The confusion and division that exists in the religious world has lead many people to conclude that one method is as good as another, or one purpose is as good as any other. This is not true. If the word “baptism” means immersion, when the Lord commands baptism He is commanding to be immersed. It is always important to follow the Lord’s instructions specifically.

In addition to this, the Bible condemns following human traditions instead of the Word of God. Jesus rebuked the “vain worship” of the Pharisees claiming they taught - **“as doctrines the commandments of men”** (Matthew 15:9). Sadly this is done in the world around us everyday.

## Infant Sprinkling

Another human tradition, upon which many risk their souls, is the sprinkling of infants. This practice is taught nowhere in Scripture and finds its origin even later in history than sprinkling.

A major error of infant sprinkling is the fact that the Bible teaches who is and is not a candidate for baptism. Mark 16:16 teaches - **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”** Further, Romans 10:10 teaches - **“...with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”** An infant can neither believe nor disbelieve. An infant can neither confess nor deny.

In this, traditions of men are again in conflict with Scripture. Man says - “...not only those that do actually profess faith and obedience unto Christ, but also infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized...” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 28 “Of Baptism,” written 1643). The Bible says that belief precedes baptism.



## Baptism in the Second Century

Although we have seen that false doctrines about baptism were introduced in the second century, it is clear from the witness of history that Christians in the second century thought that baptism was immersion in water for the remission of sins. The *Didache* taught immersion (see above). A text known as the *Epistle of Barnabas* claims - “We go down into the water laden with sins and filth and rise up from it bearing fruit in the heart resting our fear and hope on Jesus in the spirit” (11.11, Lightfoot). This shows that the writer saw baptism as immersion and necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Finally, an early apologist named Justin in his *First Apology* wrote a great deal about baptism. It is very clear that Justin believed in the necessity of baptism. He calls it “the bath for the remission of sins and regeneration” (66). Justin applies John 3:3,4 to baptism which he teaches is in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This was clearly more than sprinkling or pouring. He claims that those to be baptized “are led by us where there is water and are born again” (61).

These men were not inspired writers, but they do show what early Christians thought about the subject.

## **What About Your Baptism?**

If you are reading this study, it may be that you believe in Jesus and have even been baptized. What you must ask yourself is whether you have followed the word of God or the traditions of men? Early disciples concluded - **“...we ought to obey God rather than men”** (Acts 5:29). The Bible promised that not long after the establishment of the church, false doctrines would begin to creep in that would turn people away from the truth. The Bible teaches that those who introduce such things - **“Do not endure sound doctrine”** and thus **“they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables”** (II Timothy 4:3,4). The only way to guard against this is by looking to God’s word. Paul told Timothy that Scripture could make him - **“complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”** (II Timothy 3:17).

Were you sprinkled as a child? Were you sprinkled as an adult? Does the Bible teach that sprinkling is an acceptable substitute for immersion? No.

Were you immersed, but as an “outward sign of an inward grace” or to join a local congregation? If so we have seen that this is not an acceptable baptism.

If this is your condition why not do as the disciples of John did in Acts 19:5 - **“be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”** When you do the Lord will add you to His universal body of believers. Then as you continue a life of worship to God **“in spirit and truth”** (John 4:24), you have the hope of everlasting life with God in the age to come. From this study you now know what the Lord has commanded regarding baptism. The question is - **“why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord”** (Acts 22:16).

Kyle Pope

## Every Reference to Baptism in the New Testament

**Baptism:** Matthew 3:7; 20:22,23; 21:25; Mark 1:4; 10:38, 39; 11:30; Luke 3:3; 7:29; 12:50; 20:4; Acts 1:22; 10:37; 13:24; 18:25; 19:3,4; Romans 6:4; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12; I Peter 3:21.

**Baptisms:** Hebrews 6:2.

**Baptist:** Matthew 3:1; 11:11,12; 14:2; 16:14; 17:13; Mark 6:14; 6:24, 25; 8:28; Luke 7:20, 28, 33; 9:19.

**Baptist's:** Matthew 14:8.

**Baptize:** Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:4, 8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 33; I Corinthians 1:17.

**Baptized:** Matthew 3:6, 13-16; 20:22,23; Mark 1:5, 8-9; 10:38,39; 16:16; Luke 3:7, 12, 21; 7:29,30; 12:50; John 3:22, 23; 4:1,2; 10:40; Acts 1:5; 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47,48; 11:16; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:3-5; 22:16; Romans 6:3; I Corinthians 1:13-16; 10:2; 12:13; 15:29; Galatians 3:27.

**Baptizest:** John 1:25.

**Baptizeth:** John 1:33; 3:26.

**Baptizing:** Matthew 28:19; John 1:28, 31; 3:23.

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## Conversions in the Book of Acts

**Pentecost:** Act 2:36-41.

**Samaritans:** Acts 8:5-13.

**Ethiopian Eunuch:** Acts 8:26-39.

**Paul:** Acts 9:1-18; 22:4-16; 26:12-20.

**Cornelius:** Acts 10:1-48; 11:1-18.

**Lydia:** Acts 16:11-15.

**Philippian Jailer:** Acts 16:25-34.

**Disciples of John:** Acts 19:1-7.

## NOTES





Reconstruction of a house used by Christians for worship from ca. 200 AD in Dura Europus, Syria with a baptistry.



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