

Water Baptism: Why

Introduction: Baptism is very prominent in the New Testament. Surprisingly, it appears on the pages of the New Testament without any clear explanation of its origin or significance. This is because the Gospels, though dealing in content with the earliest days of Christianity, were among the last books to be written. As such, the original readers were already well familiar with baptism as a religious act.

History: Water baptism as a religious rite performed on people was developed during the inter-testament period (the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments). John the Baptist merely appropriated an existing religious practice.

Fact: The Greek word behind the verb “baptize” is *baptizo* (907). It remains an untranslated word in English Bibles, having been transliterated letter for letter from Greek into English. In short, it means immerse. John the Baptist was John the Dipper. Unlike with us, it was not fundamentally a religious word.

(**Technical note:** Whereas *baptizo* was an ordinary, household word, the noun *baptisma* was not so common. *Baptisma* does indeed seem to be a religious word and is not found outside of the New Testament.)

Types: There are two main types of good baptism: baptism in water and baptism by the Holy Spirit.

Overview: In the next three sessions, we will examine **1)** The purpose of New Testament baptism (why), **2)** The mode of New Testament baptism (how), and **3)** The candidates for New Testament baptism (who).

Perspective: Based on Ephesians 2:8-9, how can a person have his sins forgiven?

Salvation is by God’s grace through our faith. It is a gift from God, not as a result of works. Water baptism, no matter if a teaspoon full or tank full, never saved anybody. It is an outward sign of a inner salvation.

I. The Purpose Baptism (Why)

Purpose: *The First London Baptist Confession of 1646* states “the way and manner of dispensing this ordinance, is dipping or plunging the body under water; it being a sign, must answer the things signified, which is, that interest the saints have in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ: And that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and risen again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reign with Christ” (XL).

******1. With what was being baptized (*baptizo*) associated in Matthew 3:1-6?** Water baptism was associated with:

1) Repentance, 3:2.

2) The confession of sin, 3:6.

What is repentance (3:2)? It is from *metanoia*, “a change of thinking.” As such, it is a close parallel to faith; one never occurs without the other. Repentance and faith are opposite sides of the same coin. John preached that men should change their thinking about sin (Matthew 3:6) and believe in the One coming after him — Jesus (John 1:6-9, Acts 19:4). Water baptism was an outward sign of the inward fact that they had indeed repented.

John’s Baptism: Though he is found in the Gospels, John the Baptist was actually the last Old Testament prophet. John’s baptism predated the coming of Jesus. As such, it was preparatory and incomplete. Those baptized by John were later baptized again if they came to believe in Jesus.

******2. What criticism did John have of the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 3:7-10?** They were lacking the fruit of repentance. They talked the talk, but didn’t walk the walk! They were, in fact, unrepentant and as such were not candidates for John’s baptism.

3. How does Matthew 3:7-10 help clarify whether John baptized because of a prior repentance or in order to affect repentance? John criticized the Pharisees because they had not yet repented. To baptize unrepentant people would make a mockery of the act of baptism. Thus, John clearly only baptized people who had *already* repented. It was an outward sign of an inward act. Known hypocrites were excluded from participation.

It is clear from this that water baptism signified that a person had already repented of his sins.

******Why did John baptize people with water (Mt 3:11-12)?** He said it was for repentance.

4. Based on Matthew 3:11, did John baptize people so that they *could* repent or because they had *already* repented (i.e., was the baptism a means to repentance or the result of repentance)? How so? John baptized people because they had already repented. His baptism was an outward symbol of prior repentance.

Word Study: The key to understanding this lies in part with the word “for” (*eis* in Greek, 3:11). In Greek, *eis* can be used with reference to either a future goal (I left “for” Chicago) or a past reason (I cried “for” joy). In Matthew 3:11 it denotes a past reason (or a “because”) — John baptized them *because* they had already repented.

What three types of baptism did John refer to in Matthew 3:11? See *John 1:33*. Whereas John’s baptism was with **1) water**; Jesus’ baptized with the **2) Holy Spirit** and with **3) fire**. Thus we see that there can be at least three types of baptism: water baptism, Spirit baptism, and fire baptism.

Word Study: The English word “baptize” is from *baptizo*. The common lexical definition for *baptizo* is “to immerse.” Substitute this English translation (“immerse”) for “baptize” anywhere it is found in the New Testament and better sense can often be made of the passage.

Teacher’s Note: Some may object to the translation of *baptizo* as “immerse.” If so, do not argue the point here. Allow folks the freedom to disagree and use whatever word they feel will better translate *baptizo*. The exact meaning of the word will be studied later.

Is being baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11) a good thing or a bad thing? See Acts 1:5 & 2:1-4. According to Acts 1-2, it is a good thing, a blessing from God.

5. What does Matthew 3:11 imply about something else that water baptism is associated with? Baptism into water is associated with:

3) Baptism into the Holy Spirit (which evidently occurred at Pentecost, Acts 1:5 2:1-4). Water baptism is associated with repentance, the confessions of sin, and baptism into the Holy Spirit.

Based on Matthew 3:11-12, is baptism with fire a good thing or a bad thing? In this context, it has the negative implications of judgment and hell. Those who refused the saving baptism of the Holy Spirit would receive the destructive baptism of fiery judgment.

******To John’s astonishment, who insisted on being baptized in Matthew 3:13-17?**

What did Jesus say to convince John to baptize him (Mt 3:15)? It was necessary to fulfill all righteousness.

6. What do Jesus’ words in Matthew 3:15 indicate about something else that is associated with water baptism? That it is associated with:

4) Righteousness (as would be any good work flowing out of a saved life, Ephesians 2:10).

Aside: Notice in 3:16 that after His baptism, Jesus “went up from the water”. What does this suggest about the mode of baptism? It suggests Jesus had been down in the water, as in under it (immersion).

What was God the Father’s reaction when Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3:17)?

What does Jesus’ insistence on being baptized imply about baptism? It is very important and symbolically associated with righteousness. Thus, water baptism is an outward sign that a person is interested in being identified with righteousness rather than with sin.

7. What is baptism associated with in Matthew 28:16-20? It is associated with:

5) *Being a disciple.*

6) *Observing all that Jesus commanded (including the command to be baptized).*

8. Based on Matthew 28:16-20, why is it important for believers to follow Jesus in baptism? It is a direct command from our Lord Jesus!

Aside: Notice also the Trinitarian authority to go out and water baptize converts. To do something "in the name of" someone else is to do it under their authority (**Example:** "Stop in the name of the law").

9. Based on Acts 1:5, what is water baptism associated with? See Acts 2:1-21. It is associated with being baptized into the Spirit (Spirit baptism).

Teacher's Note: Exactly what the baptism of the Holy Spirit actually is has not been dealt with in this study. Many take it to refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost (Acts 2). As such it would have been a one-time event for the church (Ephesians 4:4). Others take it to refer not only to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, but also to the indwelling of the Spirit in each individual believer upon salvation. Still others think it refers to a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit that can occur (they say) after one's initial indwelling of the Spirit.

****10. In Acts 22:16, what did Ananias said would wash away Paul's sins? See Romans 10:13. In both English and Greek, one could understand the washing away of sins to be caused by either the baptism or the calling on Jesus' name, or both. Taken in isolation, one might erroneously conclude that Ananias believed in salvation in faith plus water baptism! However, in harmony with the rest of the New Testament, there is a better way to understand his words. It is equally possible to translate the Greek thus: "be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on his name." The washing should fundamentally be associated with the calling, not with the baptism.

Also, notice that water baptism metaphorically is associated with:

7) *the washing away sins (which is actually accomplished by calling on Jesus' name), See Romans 10:13.*

ESV Romans 10:13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Review: Water baptism is an outward sign that a person has repented, believed in Jesus, been baptized by the Holy Spirit, and has had his sins washed away (or, in Old Testament ceremonial terminology, purified).

11. What is the main point of Romans 4:1-12? The point is that justification comes by faith, apart from works. Specifically, we must be persuaded that Jesus really did die as a payment for sin and that he was raised from the dead.

12. If water baptism is necessary for salvation, then why is it not mentioned in Romans 4:1-12? Water baptism is, in fact, not necessary for salvation. As with circumcision (Romans 4:9-12), it is merely a sign of salvation (4:11).

Teaching Tool: Read Romans 4:9-12 aloud, substituting the word “baptized” for the word “circumcised.”

13. Does Romans 6:2-6 refer to water baptism or Spirit baptism? How so? The word “water” nowhere appears in Romans 6. Notice that the baptism of Romans 6 is “into His death” (not “into water”) and refers to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. To falsely read water baptism into Romans 6 is to promote an error known as baptismal regeneration (that is, that salvation occurs when one is baptized into water). This cannot be what Paul had in mind because it would directly contradict the whole of the New Testament, which declares salvation to be by faith alone (See Romans 4).

8) Water baptism represents being united with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. In this sense baptism mirrors a liquid grave.

What synonym for “baptized” or “baptism” could be drawn from Romans 6:5? The concept of being “united” with Christ is synonymous. To be spiritually baptized into Christ is to be united with Christ.

Technical Note: “baptized” in Romans 6 is from *baptizo* and “baptism” is from *baptisma*.

False Purpose of Baptism

Those who proclaim a false Gospel almost invariably insist water baptism to be necessary for one’s sins to be forgiven.

******14. What, in Mark 16:16, has led some to wrongly conclude that being “baptized” (*baptizo*) is necessary for salvation?** It sounds like one has to believe and be baptized to be saved. Taken in isolation from the rest of the Bible, it is understandable that someone might misunderstand Mark 16:16 to refer to baptismal regeneration. However, when compared with the rest of Scripture, this misunderstanding evaporates.

What in Mark 16:16 reveals Jesus was *not* teaching that water baptism is necessary for salvation? Certainly, water baptism is an important act of obedience. Any one professing to believe in Jesus and yet refusing to be baptized is of questionable sincerity. Faith water baptism are closely linked in the New Testament. Indeed, it is unthinkable that anyone would

believe in Jesus and refuse to be baptized. Like love and marriage and a horse and carriage, belief and baptism just go together! Notice, however, those who Jesus said would be condemned: “whoever does not believe.” No mention was made of not being baptized. The emphasis is on unbelief, not lack of baptism. Condemnation comes as a result of unbelief, not the lack of any ritual activity.

What Jesus said about faith and baptism is like a train conductor saying, “All who board the train and take their seats will go to Birmingham.” It is just assumed that all boarding the train will take a seat. However, the train will take them to Birmingham regardless of whether they take a seat or not. The key factor is the boarding of the train.

Note: Some early Greek MSS do not even contain Mark 16:9-20.

The Thief On The Cross: Luke 23:39-43 contains the account of a man who believed in Jesus. Jesus said the thief would be with Him in paradise. Yet the man died without being water baptized (John 19:31-37). Dying after Jesus died made this thief a New Covenant believer, one who went to be with Jesus after death and yet who was never baptized with water (he died before he could be baptized).

******Based on John 3:16-18, to whom is eternal life offered?**

Why is water baptism not mentioned as a requirement for eternal life in John 3:16-21?

Because water baptism is not a requirement for eternal life!

******Why do false teachers champion Acts 2:38 in favor of baptismal regeneration?** On the surface of some English translations, Peter seems to be asking his hearers to both repent and be baptized in order to be forgiven.

15. Examine Acts 2:38 closely. According to Peter, what role does water baptism play in the salvation process? In the Greek, the word “repent” and the phrase “for the forgiveness of your sins” are both in the second person plural (ye). The significance of this is that they go together grammatically. Peter was telling them to repent for the forgiveness of their sins. However, the phrase “be baptized, every one of you” is actually in the third person singular (“let each one be baptized”). The significance of this is that it stands alone grammatically. Thus, Peter literally told them, “Repent, all of you, for the forgiveness of your sins; and let each one be baptized.”

Thus, the forgiveness was achieved through repentance; the water baptism was to follow as a mere sign of the forgiveness that has already occurred. As always, water baptism is associated with repentance, but baptism itself is not necessary for forgiveness.

Notice also that water baptism is again associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Notice also that water baptism is again commanded. It is an act of disobedience to neglect water baptism.

Cornelius' Example: As regards the necessity of water baptism for salvation, notice that Cornelius and family received the Holy Spirit prior to being water baptized, indicating that water baptism is not required for salvation (Acts 10:44-48, 11:15-17).

******16. In Acts 16:29-34, what did the Philippian Jailer need to do in order to be saved?** He needed only to “believe” (16:31). Baptism was not a part of the salvation message. Notice however that water baptism closely followed his salvation.

******17. What does 1 Corinthians 1:13-17 indicate about whether water baptism is necessary in order to be saved?** The most prominent New Testament evangelist, the apostle Paul, was forgetful about who (beyond Stephanas) he had baptized, was “thankful” that he had not personally baptized most of the Corinthians, and specifically stated that Christ did not send him to baptize anyway! This would be a strange attitude for him to have if baptism is necessary for forgiveness. Presumably Paul the evangelist would have been more careful to see to the water baptism of his converts and more mindful of the whole matter.

Technical Note: “baptize” in 1 Corinthians 1 is from *baptizo*.

18. Based on 1 Corinthians 1:17, what does the gospel message not include? Baptism is not a part of the gospel message. If water baptism were necessary for forgiveness, then the requirement for baptism would necessarily be a part of the gospel message (1 Corinthians 15:2).

******Into what medium were the Israelis baptized, according to 1 Corinthians 10:1-5?** They were baptized into Moses.

19. What does the use of the word baptized in 1 Corinthians 10:2 reveal about what this word was used to indicate? It indicated association & identification. As such, New Testament water baptism could also serve as:

9) Baptism is an act of initiation into the covenant community; it is a way of publicly being identified with the church.

******20. What in Colossians 2:9-12 indicates that this “baptism” (*baptisma*) is Spirit baptism rather than water baptism?** Since the circumcision mentioned is clearly spiritual, so also the baptism mentioned in parallel to it would seem to be spiritual.

21. What type of washing (3:5) is meant in Titus 3:4-7? Just as the “renewal” (3:5) occurred by the Holy Spirit’s work, so too the “washing” (*loutron*, 3067) occurred because of “rebirth.” Rebirth has a spiritual washing effect in that it washes away our sins. Note that the word “water” does not appear anywhere in this entire chapter. To read water baptism into this passage is truly to force into it something that is not there. In fact, is not water baptism one of the “righteous things” (3:5) that a person might do?

So What?

22. How would you summarize the purpose of water baptism?

1) There are two main types of good baptism: water and Spirit.

2) Water baptism is associated with the confession of sin, repentance, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, righteousness, being a disciple of Jesus, obedience of Jesus’ commands, the washing away of sins and our identification with Christ (death, burial, resurrection). It is also an initiation rite into the new covenant community.

3) Water baptism is clearly not a part of the gospel message and is not necessary for salvation.

4) Spirit baptism is necessary for salvation and is clearly salvific. Spirit baptism places us into Christ.

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04/21/16