

Baptism

Understanding Christian baptism

The Command to Be Baptized

Matthew 28:19

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Mark 16:16

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Baptism is not merely a suggestion or optional practice in the Christian faith—it is a direct command from Jesus Christ Himself. In His Great Commission, Jesus explicitly commanded His disciples to baptize believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This trinitarian formula establishes baptism as a sacred act that connects the believer to the very nature of God.

The Gospel of Mark records Jesus saying that belief and baptism go hand in hand in the salvation process. While faith is essential, baptism is presented as the natural and expected response to that faith. It is the outward confession of an inward reality.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost demonstrates the apostolic understanding of this command. When the convicted crowd asked what they must do, Peter's response was immediate and clear: repent and be baptized. This wasn't presented as two separate options but as a unified response to the Gospel message. The promise attached—forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit—shows the spiritual significance of this act.

Throughout church history, the universal practice of baptism has been maintained across nearly all Christian traditions, testifying to its foundational importance. The command is not culturally conditioned or temporary but represents Christ's permanent instruction for His church.

Baptism and Salvation

Mark 16:16

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 22:16

And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

1 Peter 3:21

The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

The relationship between baptism and salvation is one of the most important and sometimes debated aspects of Christian theology. Scripture presents baptism not as a mere symbol disconnected from salvation, but as intimately connected to the forgiveness of sins and entry into the Christian life.

Mark 16:16 directly links belief and baptism with salvation, though it also clarifies that unbelief is what condemns. This shows baptism as the expected response to saving faith. Acts 2:38 goes further, explicitly connecting baptism with the remission of sins. Peter doesn't say baptism symbolizes forgiveness; he says it is "for the remission of sins."

When Ananias spoke to the newly converted Saul (Paul), he urged him not to delay: "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord"

(Acts 22:16). The language of washing away sins is active and present, not merely symbolic or memorial.

First Peter 3:21 makes a bold statement: baptism "doth also now save us." Peter clarifies this isn't about physical washing but "the answer of a good conscience toward God" through Christ's resurrection. Baptism is efficacious not through the water itself but through faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This doesn't mean baptism is a work that earns salvation—rather, it is the moment when God's grace, the believer's faith, and obedient confession converge. It is where we actively accept what Christ has done, dying to our old self and rising to new life in Him.

Baptism as Burial and Resurrection

Romans 6:3-4

[3] Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? [4] Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Colossians 2:12

Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

Paul's theology of baptism goes deep into its symbolic and spiritual meaning. Baptism is not merely getting wet; it is a participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When a believer is immersed in water, they are symbolically buried with Christ. When they emerge from the water, they are raised to walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:3-4 is fundamental to understanding this reality. Paul asks rhetorically if believers don't know that baptism connects them to Christ's death. The answer assumes they should know this basic truth. We are "buried with him by baptism into death" so that "like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

This isn't just powerful imagery—it's spiritual reality. In baptism, our old self dies. The person enslaved to sin, separated from God, under condemnation is put to death. That person is buried in the watery grave. But just as surely, a new person emerges—born again, regenerated, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, adopted into God's family.

Colossians 2:12 adds that we are "buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead." Notice the role of faith: baptism works through faith in God's powerful operation. It is God who raises us, just as He raised Christ.

This understanding should transform how we view baptism. It's not a graduation ceremony marking the end of something, but a funeral and birth—the end of the old life and the beginning of the new. Every baptism should be celebrated with the joy of resurrection.

The Proper Mode of Baptism

Matthew 3:16

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:

Acts 8:36-39

[36] And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? [37] And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. [38] And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. [39] And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.

Romans 6:4

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Colossians 2:12

Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

The mode of baptism—how it is performed—matters because the symbolism matters. The Greek word "baptizo" means to immerse, dip, or plunge. This wasn't lost on the early church, which practiced immersion as the standard mode of baptism for centuries.

When Jesus was baptized, Matthew records that He "went up straightway out of the water," indicating He had been in the water, not merely having water sprinkled on Him. The preposition "in" (Greek: en) in Acts 8:38 shows Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch went down into the water, and verse 39 shows they came up out of the water.

But beyond linguistic evidence, the theological symbolism demands immersion. Romans 6:4 speaks of burial with Christ in baptism. We don't bury someone by sprinkling dirt on them—we place them fully into the ground. Similarly, baptism by immersion pictures the complete death and burial of the old self and the resurrection to new life.

Colossians 2:12 reinforces this with the language of being "buried with him in baptism." The imagery is complete submersion, complete death to the old life. When someone emerges from the water, it pictures the resurrection power of God raising them to new life in Christ.

Historical evidence shows that immersion was the dominant practice in early Christianity. Baptismal pools (baptisteries) from the early centuries were designed for immersion. While other modes developed later in church history due to various practical considerations, the biblical pattern and theological symbolism point clearly to immersion as the proper mode of Christian baptism.

Who Should Be Baptized

Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 8:12

But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Acts 8:36-38

[36] And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? [37] And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. [38] And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.

Acts 16:31-33

[31] And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. [32] And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. [33] And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway.

The New Testament pattern for baptism is clear: those who hear the Gospel, believe it, repent of their sins, and confess Jesus as Lord should be baptized. Baptism follows faith; it doesn't create faith or substitute for it.

Acts 2:38 sets the pattern: repentance comes first, then baptism. The thousands baptized at Pentecost were those who "gladly received his word" (Acts 2:41). Faith preceded baptism. In Acts 8:12, both men and women believed Philip's preaching and were baptized—again, belief came first.

The Ethiopian eunuch's baptism in Acts 8:36-38 is particularly instructive. After Philip explained the Gospel, the eunuch asked, "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" Philip's response in many manuscripts is: "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." The eunuch confessed, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God," and was immediately baptized. This shows the requirement of personal faith and confession.

The Philippian jailer believed with his household and was baptized with them (Acts 16:31-33). The text doesn't give us details about the ages of household members, but the context shows that those baptized were those who believed.

This raises questions about infant baptism, which became common in later church history. The New Testament pattern consistently shows baptism following conscious faith, repentance, and confession. While there are theological arguments for infant baptism in some traditions, the apostolic practice appears to baptize believers who could personally profess faith in Christ.

The question "What doth hinder me to be baptized?" should still be answered today: nothing hinders those who believe with all their heart.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

1 Corinthians 12:13

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

Titus 3:5

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;

John 3:5

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

Baptism is intimately connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Peter's promise at Pentecost explicitly links baptism with receiving the Holy Spirit: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38).

This connection between water and Spirit appears throughout Scripture. In John 3:5, Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born "of water and of the Spirit." While interpretations vary, many see this as referring to baptism and spiritual regeneration—two aspects of one new birth experience.

Titus 3:5 speaks of God saving us "by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." The washing language connects with baptism, while regeneration and renewal point to the Spirit's work. These are not separate events but part of the unified experience of conversion.

First Corinthians 12:13 declares, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." This speaks of Spirit baptism, but it's connected to the unity created among believers—a unity expressed and realized through water baptism into the body of Christ.

The relationship between water baptism and Spirit baptism has been understood differently across Christian traditions. Some see them as always simultaneous; others distinguish them. But what's clear is that water baptism is the normal context in which believers receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not earned by baptism, but God has chosen to bestow this gift in connection with our obedient response to the Gospel.

The promise remains: those who believe and are baptized receive not only forgiveness but also the indwelling presence and power of God's Spirit.

One Baptism

Ephesians 4:4-6

[4] There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; [5] One Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Acts 19:1-5

[1] And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, [2] He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said

unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. [3] And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. [4] Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. [5] When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians emphasizes the unity of the faith with seven "ones": one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. In this list of fundamental Christian realities, baptism is singular—there is one baptism.

This doesn't mean everyone must be baptized in exactly the same way with identical words, but it means there is one essential Christian baptism that marks entry into the body of Christ. Just as there is one Gospel, one faith, one Lord, there is one baptism that responds to that Gospel and faith and unites us to that Lord.

The uniqueness of Christian baptism is shown in Acts 19:1-5, where Paul encountered disciples in Ephesus who had only received John's baptism. Though John's baptism was from God and valid in its time, it was incomplete—it pointed forward to the Messiah but didn't incorporate believers into Christ Himself. When Paul explained the Gospel fully, these disciples were baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus."

This shows that Christian baptism is distinct from other ritual washings. It's not just about repentance (John's emphasis) but about being united to Christ in His death and resurrection. It's baptism into His name, into His body, into the new covenant.

The "one baptism" also speaks against re-baptism for those properly baptized into Christ. While some traditions practice baptism multiple times for various reasons, the New Testament pattern seems to be one baptism at conversion. If someone was baptized without proper understanding or faith, there may be cases where proper Christian baptism is needed, but generally, baptism—like birth—happens once.

This one baptism unites all true Christians across time, culture, and denomination. It is a bond of unity in the one body of Christ.

Living Out Your Baptism

Romans 6:4

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:11-14

[11] Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. [12] Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. [13] Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. [14] For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.

Galatians 3:27

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Colossians 2:12

Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

Baptism is not the end of the Christian life but the beginning. Paul's command in Romans 6:4 is that we should "walk in newness of life." Baptism inaugurates a new way of living, and we must live in accordance with what happened to us in baptism.

Romans 6:11-14 applies the theology of baptism to daily life. Because we died to sin and rose to new life in baptism, we must "reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." This isn't just believing a doctrine; it's living out a reality. We don't let sin reign in our mortal bodies. We don't yield our members as instruments of unrighteousness. Instead, we yield ourselves to God as those alive from the dead.

Galatians 3:27 says, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." This is the language of clothing oneself. In baptism, we put on Christ like a garment—His righteousness covers us, His identity becomes ours, His character is what we're to display. Every day, we live out this reality of being clothed in Christ.

Colossians 2:12 reminds us that we were raised with Christ through faith. This resurrection power is not just for the future; it's for now. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead works in us to live holy lives, overcome temptation, love others, and fulfill God's purposes.

Living out our baptism means remembering who we are: dead to sin, alive to God, united to Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, part of His body. When temptation comes, we remember we died to that old life. When challenges come, we remember resurrection power lives in us. When we feel alone, we remember we're part of the one body, united with all believers through one baptism.

Baptism is a once-for-all event, but its implications last a lifetime.

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