

In Christ: The Meaning, Importance, and Significance of Baptism in the Church

Introduction

The final mandate Christ gave to his disciples—and to the universal church—is that we are to “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 everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19–20; cf. Mark 16:15–16).¹

His teaching, and what we see in the rest of the New Testament, is the pattern, the process of being engrafted into the Church of God: *hearing the gospel, believing the gospel, and then baptism.*

A few passages from the book of Acts show us this pattern.² Following Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, in Acts 2:37–41, Luke writes, “When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins , . . [s]o those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them.”

A few chapters later, Philip, one of the first appointed deacons (6:5), after proclaiming the gospel to the people in Samaria, Luke writes, “when they believed [him] as he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women we baptized” (8:12–13).

And in the same chapter, we see a witnessing encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, in which Philip “proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that [Acts 8:32]. As they were traveling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, “Look, there’s water. What should keep me from being baptized? So he ordered the chariot to stop, and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures will be taken from *The Christian Standard Bible*, (Nashville: Holman, 2017).

² There are eleven texts in the New Testament of actual baptisms: Acts 2:37–41; 8:12–17, 35–38; 9:18; 22:16; 10:44–48; 16:13–15, 30–34; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:14, 16

both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (8:35–38).

Paul’s conversion shows us this pattern. A few days following his blinding-encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road, in which he was summoned to be his apostle to the Gentiles, Luke writes, “something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized” (Acts 9:18).

Baptism in the New Testament

Baptism as practiced by the Jewish people during the time of Christ and before that symbolized repentance and purification, however, it was not identical to that of Christian baptism as we see in the New Testament. The first examples of baptism in the New Testament occurred in the opening chapters of the Gospels. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, makes way for the Lord’s arrival, who commands all to repent, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” (Matt 3:2). And immediately following Jesus’ command, Matthew writes, that all of Jerusalem, Judea, and the entire region around the Jordan “were baptized by him [John] in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (3:5–6). However, this type of ritual washing did, and does, not actually cleanse anyone intrinsically from sin, for it is Christ of whom John says is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

While the Old Testament form of baptism had grace connected to it, it was missing the work of the Spirit, which further reveals the real meaning of what baptism signifies. John proclaimed to those he was baptizing, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove his sandals. He himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11). Again, John was making the path straight for the Lord, preparing the Jews for the long-awaited Messiah. Those who came with a repentant heart received a baptism from the pre-runner of Christ, in preparation for the true baptism to come.

In the scriptural account of John’s baptizing confessing Jews in the Jordan, Jesus comes to him to receive baptism (Matt 3:13–17; Mark; 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22 [cf. John 1:29–34]). However, Christ does not undergo baptism for repentance, for he had nothing he needed to repent of; rather, his baptism was

in accordance with God's plan in the fulfilling of all righteousness (Matt 3:15). The baptism of Christ at the Jordan was his anointing as the Messiah, for Matthew writes that when he was baptized, "immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice from heaven said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt 3:16–17).

This event marked the fulfillment of the specific Messianic prophecies written in Psalms 2:7 in "the declaration of his sonship"³ and Isaiah 42:1, in the anointing of the LORD's servant. Christ is ready for his ministry, fulfilling John's proclamation that there is one to come who is mightier than he is that baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11). Baptism, here then, does not denote ritual cleansing for Christ; rather, "it inaugurates the ministry of Jesus which will be characterized by the power of the Spirit of the new age."⁴

The next time baptism is mentioned in the Gospels comes at the end of Jesus' ministry. There are five verses in the Gospels (not including Matt 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4, for these are parallel accounts where Christ poses a question to the Pharisees about John's baptizing when his authority is challenged and is not pertinent to this essay) where Christ speaks of or gives a command regarding baptism (Matt 28:19; Mark 10:38–39; 16:16; Luke 12:50).

In the examples found in Mark 10:38–39 and Luke 12:50, Christ speaks to the disciples about baptism, not as a ritual cleansing but as a form of death. In Mark 10:35–40, John and James, the sons of Zebedee, make a request to the Lord to be granted seats of prominence, one to left hand and one to the right hand of Christ in glory. Jesus responds, saying to them, "Are you able to drink the cup I drink or to be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). Christ's reference to *drinking from the cup* is emblematic of the depiction of God in the Old Testament pouring out his wrath in judgment or making the wicked drink from his cup of wrath in judgment (Isa 51:17; 22; Jer 25:15–16; Eze 23:31–34; Mal 14:36). What is significant in these passages from Mark and Luke is that Christ associates baptism with the drinking from the cup—baptism and death (in this case martyrdom) are synonymous.

³ Dockery, "Baptism," in Green, McKnight, and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 57

⁴ Ibid.

However, the key difference from the Old Testament is that Christ is willingly drinking from the cup, undergoing baptism in judgment for wrath he does not deserve. And furthermore, and most significantly, in the institution of the Lord's supper found in Matthew 26:26–29, “Christ calls the cup, which he reached to his disciples in the supper, ‘the cup of the new testament in his blood,’ [thus signifying that] the New Testament would be perfected and sealed by the blood of the testator, which he shed at his death.”⁵ His blood consecrated and established the new covenant. And baptism was to be administered as a sign of this new covenant.

From the Old Testament rite to the close of the Gospels, the meaning of baptism undergoes a significant shift in how it is to be understood. And it is in the writings of Paul where we get a more thorough understanding of its meaning and significance. From repentance to cleansing to death to life, this further revealed understanding of baptism establishes the framework for baptism, its context, and what it now represents in the New Testament church, and for the Christian church today.

Paul on Baptism

In the Book of Romans, Paul, like Christ, uses the word *baptism* in reference to death. However, there is a slight difference from Paul's perspective. Baptism and death are not synonymous terms; rather, the fuller meaning is baptism and death *in Christ* is what links them together, bringing a more concise meaning to baptism. In Romans 6, Paul explains what life is to look like for one who has been made alive in Christ. As a new creation in Christ, sin abounds no more but it is grace that abounds. Paul writes, “What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom 6:1–2).

And here is where Paul alludes to baptism, metaphorically, as death in Christ. He writes, “Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3–4).

⁵ Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man, 2 Vols.* Volume 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), p. 307.

Baptism is not only symbolic of death; rather, it specifically represents a uniting with Christ in his death. Paul writes, “our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be rendered powerless so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin,” having been “raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Rom 6:6; Col 2:12). Believers, who have been set free from the bondage of sin, are now made free and alive to God in Christ (6:7–11). In Galatians, Paul uses different imagery to represent the believer’s union with Christ by referring to baptism as a putting on of Christ (3:27). The reality of this event is that “the baptized ‘took off’ their old life and ‘put on Christ’, thereby becoming one with him, and so qualified to participate in the life of the kingdom of God.”⁶

In the Book of Colossians, Paul establishes a relationship between the covenant sign of circumcision and baptism. He writes, “You were also circumcised in him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ” (2:11). Here, Paul not only associates baptism with death in Christ, he also links it to circumcision, thus setting precedence for it as a sign of the new covenant.

Circumcision, as the initiating rite of the old covenant, represented in a cutting away of sin, undergoing a change of heart, and entering exclusively into the household of faith.⁷ The Judaizers, Jews who confessed faith in the Messiah but still held to the Mosaic Law, expected that Gentiles needed to be circumcised to enter into the covenant family. They look to Genesis 17:9–4 support for their view on circumcision. In this section of text, Moses writes that every person, whether Jew or someone from the outside, who enters into the covenant family of God must be circumcised. A failure to do so would result in being cut off from the people of God.⁸

⁶ G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), p. 62.

⁷ R. C. Sproul and Keith A. Mathison, *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, Fla.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Ligonier Ministries: Produced and distributed by Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 2008), p. 1730.

⁸ T. R. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” in Hawthorne, Martin, and Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 138.

The Judaizers, in understanding the importance of this command in Genesis 17 and recognizing circumcision as the identifying mark of the covenant relationship with Yahweh, placed the validity of one's salvation on it, teaching that one had to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). Paul's teaching in Colossians refutes this view. In the new covenant, the cross ended the necessity of Jewish rite because it "replaced circumcision as the way of entrance into the people of God."⁹ Jew and Gentile believers are buried with Christ in his death and raised with him through faith, no longer requiring a physical circumcision of the flesh, for they are members of the people of God through faith "by the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11).

Conclusion

What does this mean for believers?

1. The rite of baptism is *designed for believers who have repented of their sin and have put their faith in God and in his Christ.*¹⁰ The model demonstrated in John's baptism displayed a personal conviction and understanding of the need for cleansing in repentance of sin.¹¹
2. Baptism is *an essential part of Christian discipleship.*¹² The support for this statement is the link that Christ makes between discipleship and baptism in the last chapters of Matthew and Mark. The two verses in the Gospels referring to baptism (Matt 28:19 noted above and Mark 16:15-16) are given as part of the command of the Great Commission. And in Mark's record of the Great Commission, Jesus says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."
3. Theologically, *water baptism presupposes spiritual regeneration* as a prevenient and primary work of God in and through the person of the Holy Spirit.¹³ John the Baptist said that the one who is to come would baptize with the Spirit. From a logical and chronological perspective, the Spirit regenerates the heart

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Andreas J. Kostenberger, "Baptism in the Gospels," in Schreiner, Wright, and Clendenen, *Believer's Baptism*. p. 33

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 34.

