## Water Baptism

Water baptism is an almost universally accepted practice among Christian denominations. Christians observe this ordinance in obedience to the command of Christ, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).

Three groups exist, however, that do not practice water baptism: the Quakers, the Salvation Army, and “Ultra-Dispensationalists. We will say a few words about the first group.

The Quakers trace back to the ministry of the English minister George Fox (1624-1691), who emphasized the personal direction of the Spirit in the Christian life. Consequently, adherents of this movement refrain from formalism of every type, including church ordinances.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the opinion of Quakers, spiritually mature believers have no need for physical signs since these ordinances are essentially spiritual in nature.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We respond that water baptism was instituted by the Lord Jesus Himself, and that in New Testament times, it was strictly observed. Even the first apostles adhered to the Lord’s instruction to baptize. In addition, the physical act of water baptism, along with the Lord’s Supper, remind us of the historical basis of our faith – Jesus Christ truly came in the flesh, suffered on the cross, and rose from the dead.

### А. Origin of Water Baptism

Where did the practice of water baptism originate? Is it of human or divine origin? In the pre-Christian era, various ceremonial washings were practiced which symbolized purification and renewal. From the beginning of time, the human heart has desired to be clean before God and to obtain new life. Beasley-Murray comments, “Ritual cleansings in water were practiced from immemorial antiquity.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This should not surprise us, since fallen humanity truly needs cleansing and renewal. Since water is life-giving, useful for cleansing, and a method for burial, we can comprehend why it became a common means among ancient peoples for expressing these religious sentiments. So then, even before its appearance in Christianity, the symbolism of baptism was already understood.

We give special attention to the Greek “mystery religions.” The ceremonial cleansing in their rites bears some resemblance to the Christian ordinance. According to the research of Fergusen, the mysteries promised forgiveness of sins, participation in a mystical death, acquisition of new life, and spiritual enlightenment.[[4]](#footnote-4) On the other hand, significant differences also exist. The teaching and overall worldview of the mysteries radically differs from the Christian worldview. Moreover, baptism among the mysteries lacked emphasis on moral reform. Finally, it is unlikely that Hellenistic cults exerted a great influence on first-century Jews living in Palestine.

Along with the appearance of Christian baptism, Judaism enacted a similar practice: the baptism of proselytes (new converts to Judaism).[[5]](#footnote-5) The process of conversion to Judaism had three components: circumcision (for males), ceremonial washing, and offering a sacrifice to God. The Mishna (3rd c.) and the Talmud (6th c.) speak of baptism for proselytes, yet the traditions reflected in these passages predate them.

In other writings composed around the time of Christ, namely by Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, there is no mention of proselyte baptism. Furthermore, in the Apocrypha, baptism is also absent. It seems unlikely, then, that Christian baptism originated with proselyte baptism in Judaism. All specific mentions of that rite among the Jews date after Christian baptism appeared.

Before Christianity, however, there existed a sect of Judaism called the “Essenes,” who lived in the Qumran community along the Dead Sea. They employed ceremonial washings in their worship.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although we cannot trace Christian baptism to the practice at Qumran, questions arise about the relationship of these rites with the baptism of John the Baptist.

In Old Testament times, ritual washings were employed, about which the author of Hebrews testifies (Heb 9:10).[[7]](#footnote-7) Besides ceremonial cleansing, the Psalms and the Prophets speak of washings in a metaphorical sense as an expression of repentance or of receiving forgiveness (Ps 51:2, 7; Isa 1:16; Jer 4:14). Finally, the Prophets speak of cleansing in the context of the eschatological hope when Yahweh will visit His people with future spiritual renewal (Isa 44:3; Zech 13:1; Ezek 36:25).

Since Christianity appeared in the context of Old Testament faith, it seems likely that Old Testament cleansing rites influenced the early Christians’ understanding of water baptism. Augustus Strong notes that another Old Testament rite, Passover, gave rise to the Lord’s Supper.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet, as we will demonstrate, Old Testament washings exerted only an indirect influence on Christianity through the baptism of John the Baptist.

Clearly, Christian baptism derived directly from the baptism that John, the forerunner of Messiah, performed. Jesus Himself submitted to this baptism.[[9]](#footnote-9) John received his commission to baptize directly from the Lord in order to prepare the way for Messiah (Mk 1:2-5; Matt 3:1-3; Lk 3:2-6). John 1:33 records that God Himself charged John to baptize. Therefore, we can confidently conclude that God Himself is the initiator of the rite of baptism.

What can we say, then, about the relationship of John’s baptism to the forms of ceremonial cleansing already in practice in his day? We can see many similarities between John and the community at Qumran. Some feel that John actually belonged to the sect of Essenes and borrowed the practice of water baptism from them.

However, we can also note differences between John and Qumran. First, we lack data as to whether the Qumran community actually baptized its new members, or whether they merely practiced regular cleansing rites. John baptized each individual only once. Second, in Qumran, worshipers immersed themselves, while John performed the rite on seekers.[[10]](#footnote-10) Finally, John’s baptism was intended not for just one group, like the Essenes, but for all of Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Others propose that John based his baptism, with adaptations, on the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism.[[12]](#footnote-12) On the other hand, John’s baptism differed in that it contained an ethical aspect, that is, repentance, and an eschatological element – preparation for Messiah’s coming and the appearance of God’s kingdom.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition, the proselytes baptized themselves, whereas John baptized those coming to him.[[14]](#footnote-14) Moreover, proselyte baptism was intended for Gentiles, while John’s was for all people – Gentiles and Jews.[[15]](#footnote-15) Finally, it appears doubtful that Jews practiced proselyte baptism before John began his baptizing (see discussion above).

Some connect John’s baptism with Old Testament ritual washings.[[16]](#footnote-16) As noted before, in the Old Testament washings and purifications served as symbols of spiritual renewal (Isa 44:3; Zech 13:1; Ezek 36:25). Lampe notes that the prophets predicted not only an eschatological cleansing from sin, but also an outpouring of the Spirit, which John the Baptist did as well.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In summary, we conclude that John’s baptism in the Jordan was indeed closely connected to the Old Testament prophetic expectation of an eschatological cleansing from sin and an outpouring of the Spirit on God’s people. John was certainly aware of this expectation. Nevertheless, we also assert that John did not initiate this ritual, but received it as a commission from the Lord. Water baptism is not merely a human invention, but originated in God. Although other similar rites existed before Christian baptism, God chose to use the cleansing power of water to accomplish His own unique purpose.

We must also touch on the theme of forgiveness of sins through John’s baptism. We concur with McIntyre that since John required repentance before water baptism (Lk 3:7-8), forgiveness likely resulted from the act of repentance rather than the performance of water baptism.

### B. Significance of Water Baptism

The most important question concerning water baptism is its significance. What exactly happens during the performance of baptism? Do the participants truly receive grace from God by partaking in the physical act, or is baptism merely a symbol of what believers receive from the Lord through faith?

**1. Biblical Data**

The following biblical texts are often interpreted in support of the claim that water baptism has sacramental powers to transmit grace for forgiveness of sins and new birth.

**Mark 16:16 –** *He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.*

From this verse, it seems that along with faith, acceptance of water baptism in required for salvation. However, we must consider other factors here.[[18]](#footnote-18) First, this text does not address the question of those who believe, but do not receive baptism. In addition, it specifically condemns only those who reject the gospel.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Second, in many of the leading Greek manuscripts, the final part of Mark 16 is missing (v. 9-20).[[20]](#footnote-20) The possibility that these verses were not contained in the original writings is also supported by the following observations. In these questionable verses, we observe a different literary style than in the rest of the gospel of Mark. Also significant is that many words in this section do not appear elsewhere in Mark.[[21]](#footnote-21) Furthermore, some Greek manuscripts contain a different ending after verse 8, which may indicate that the original text ended there and editors to the text added one ending or another.

In summary, we feel that in the light of the questionable reliability of Mark 16:9-20, it would be problematic to base such an important doctrine as water baptism on the foundation of this passage.

**John 3:5** – *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

Many feel that the phrase “born of water” refers to Christian baptism.[[22]](#footnote-22) Of note is that the words “water” and “Spirit” are joined by a single preposition ἐξ (*eks*), i.е., “of,” which may link the actions of these two nouns. Therefore, through water the Spirit gives new birth.[[23]](#footnote-23)

However, for Nicodemus, to whom these words were addressed, the idea of Christian baptism would make no sense. Furthermore, in John’s Gospel, little attention is paid to water baptism – its role is even minimized (see 3:22-26; 4:1-2).[[24]](#footnote-24) Even Jesus’ baptism in mentioned only indirectly (1:32-33). Moreover, in chapter 3 the role of the Spirit is emphasized, not the role of water. In fact, water is not mentioned again.[[25]](#footnote-25) Carson comments, “If water = baptism is so important for entering the kingdom, it is surprising that the rest of the discussion never mentions it again.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

An alternative interpretation is that the phrase in question refers to the baptism of John the Baptist. This would have made sense to Nicodemus, and he would have understood it to refer to repentance. He would have taken Jesus’ words in the following way: “Unless one repents and receives the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

Another possibility is a reference to Old Testament expectation of a future spiritual renewal, which is often expressed under the figure of an “outpouring” (see Joel 2:28-29; Isa 32:15; 44:3-5).[[27]](#footnote-27) In Ezekiel, water and Spirit are combined in such a context:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you… (Ezek 36:25-27).

**Acts 2:38-39** – *Peter {said} to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.”*

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter summoned the crowd to repentance and water baptism. Many therefore conclude that water baptism is necessary for receiving forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit.[[28]](#footnote-28) We also read that immediately after the new converts received water baptism, “that day there were added about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41), which gives the impression that baptism qualified them to enter the Church and the Kingdom.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Others challenge this interpretation. Averbeck argues that in John’s baptism, the key element was repentance, and that the apostles stressed the same.[[30]](#footnote-30) So then, he concludes that repentance, not baptism, leads to forgiveness.

Also important to note is that in other passages in Acts, where Peter speaks of conditions for salvation, he fails to mention baptism again (Acts 3:19; 5:31; 10:43).[[31]](#footnote-31) Since the book of Acts was written by Luke, it will also prove insightful to look at other texts where Luke writes about requirements for salvation (see Lk 24:47, Acts 13:38-39, Acts 16:30-31, Acts 26:18). In such passages, we find no mention of water baptism.[[32]](#footnote-32) The only exception is Acts 22:16, which we will examine more closely in the next section. In his commentary on Acts 2:38, Buse confirms, “This is the only verse in Acts that explicitly links together baptism and the bestowal of the Spirit.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

**Acts 22.16 –** *Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.*

In this narrative passage, Ananias was sent by the Lord to pray for Saul. He announced that his purpose was for Saul to “regain (his) sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). Many view this verse as teaching forgiveness of sins through water baptism. Before this time, Saul had been fasting, and only after his baptism did he take food (Acts 9:19), which may indicate the joy of his spiritual rebirth.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Those who reject this interpretation point out several features of this verse. First, it contains two imperatives: “be baptized” and “wash away.” If Ananias had meant to communicate that baptism results in forgiveness of sins, he could have employed the conjunction ἱνα (*hina*), i.е., “in order to.” The verse would then read, “Be baptized in order to wash away your sins.” The fact that Ananias did not express himself in this way allows us to suggest that the imperatives “be baptized” and “wash away” refer to separate actions.

Second, these imperatives are associated with two participles: ἀναστὰς (*anastas*), i.е., “arise,” and ἐπικαλεσάμενος (*epikalesamenos*), i.е., “call.” Judging by their positions in the sentence, the first participle relates to the first imperative, and the second to the second.[[35]](#footnote-35) The second participle fulfills the function “means.” So then, Saul “washed away” his sins by means of calling on the name of the Lord.

Third, we must clearly delineate Saul’s spiritual condition at the time. Was he already saved or not? On the one hand, Ananias invited him to “wash away your sins,” which would apply to an unsaved person.[[36]](#footnote-36) On the other hand, as a result of his meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, he became convinced that Jesus had risen and called Him “Lord” (κύριος).[[37]](#footnote-37) Also noteworthy is that Ananias did not preach the gospel to Saul, which one would expect if Saul was still an unbeliever. Finally, Ananias addresses Saul as “brother.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Fourth, the participle ἐπικαλεσάμενος (*epikalesamenos*), i.е., “call,” stands in the grammatical tense “aorist,” which usually indicates an event occurring before the action of the main verb. So then, Saul had called upon the name of the Lord *before* he received forgiveness of sins and, consequently, before he received water baptism. It is very possible that Ananias was inviting Saul to make his *formal*, but not his *actual/effectual* appeal for salvation (see discussion in section B-4).

Fifth, Ananias came so that Saul would “regain (his) sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17). In light of the fact that in the New Testament narrative, both healing and receiving the Spirit were administered by laying on of hands, we may conclude that Saul received the Spirit by Ananias laying his hands on him. If so, then Saul received gift of the Holy Spirit before he received water baptism.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**1 Peter 3:21 –** *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.*

Without doubt, the most debated verse on water baptism in the New Testament epistles is 1 Peter 3:21. Many see in this verse the requirement of baptism for salvation. What did Peter intend to communicate here? It is important to note that, except for Acts 2:38, he does not mention elsewhere water baptism in connection with salvation (see Acts 3:19; 5:31; 10:43).

This passage is located in a context of suffering for righteousness (3:8-4:6). The supreme example of such suffering is the Lord Jesus (3:18). At the same time, Peter deviates from this theme to outline the redemptive work of the Savior in general. Four stages are delineated:

(1) Christ’s death – for forgiveness of sins (v. 18)

(2) Christ’s descent into Hades – to preach to spirits in prison (v. 19-20)

(3) Christ’s resurrection – for salvation, connected with water baptism (v. 21)

(4) Christ’s ascension and exaltation – for overthrowing demonic powers (v. 22).

In this light, we can better understand why Peter introduces the topic of water baptism in this passage. Peter’s goal was to connect his second and third points – from the descent of Christ to His resurrection. He found this connection in the rite of baptism. Baptism has common ground with Noah’s flood in that both involve water, and is connected with Christ’s resurrection in the symbolic “resurrection” from the baptismal water.

In addition, we also underscore that Peter makes two qualifications to the claim that baptism saves. First, he clarifies that it saves “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Therefore, the effective element in salvation is not the baptismal rite, but Christ’s resurrection. Second, Peter stresses the inner attitude of the candidate to this event and downplays the external washing: “…not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience.” This prompts Beasley-Murray to conclude that these qualifications give more precision to Peter’s claim that baptism saves.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Taking into consideration: (1) that Peter’s main goal in mentioning baptism in this passage is to link Christ’s descent into Hades with His resurrection, and (2) his two qualifications about the role of baptism in salvation, it is fair to conclude that in this passage, water baptism plays not a primary, but a secondary role in God’s salvation plan.

Another factor that complicates the interpretation of this verse is the translation of the Greek term ἐπερώτημα (*eperotema*), which is sometimes translated “promise,” yet the basic meaning of the word is “request.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Connected with this is the interpretation of the genitive case here: “appeal (of) a good conscience.” If we define ἐπερώτημα (*eperotema*) as “promise,” the verse refers to promising God a good conscience. The problem here is that promising God a good conscience does not explain why “baptism saves you,” which is Peter’s goal here. If salvation comes by promising God a good conscience, then salvation is by works.[[42]](#footnote-42) The more common translation, “an appeal to God for a good conscience,” is preferred, although this involves an irregular use of the genitive – “for.”

**Romans 6:3-5 –** *Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with {Him} in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be {in the likeness} of His resurrection.*

Some hold to the view that the phrase “baptized into Christ Jesus” refers not to water baptism, but to “baptism into Christ” in the sense of the union of believers with Christ in His death and resurrection. In other words, God in His grace made believers participants in the historical events of Christ’s death and resurrection, and Paul here is expressing that spiritual reality under the figure of baptism.[[43]](#footnote-43) On the other hand, some defend the position that, according to Romans 6, one must be physically baptized to be included in Christ’s redemptive work.

In assessment of these views, we make the following comments. It is hard to see that Paul is merely talking about a “spiritual” baptism here, that is, a participation in union with Christ. He is more likely appealing to the universal experience among believers of being water baptized.[[44]](#footnote-44)

On the other hand, we also cannot support the view that Paul obligated his readers to receive God’s grace through the baptismal rite. Of note is that after Paul “connects” with his audience by referring to their experience of baptism in verses 3-4, he does not mention it again. Beginning from verse 5, Paul transitions from the topic of water baptism to that which it represents – our real participation in Christ’s death and resurrection. Clearly, the power of God for sanctification is linked not with the baptismal rite, but with the spiritual union believers enjoy with Christ, which is actualized in them not by receiving baptism, but through faith (see v. 11).

Also significant is that in his thorough exposition of the doctrine of justification (Rom 1-5), Paul makes no mention of baptism in water. If baptism was required for justification, Paul made a massive and inexcusable omission in these key chapters.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**Colossians 2:11-13 –** *In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.*

In verse 12, Paul employs the figure of circumcision to describe the believer’s liberation from the power of sin. The question arises, then, is water baptism the means by which Christ accomplishes this spiritual circumcision in the hearts of believers?

Several arguments serve to refute this idea. First, we examine the parallel Paul draws between circumcision and baptism. Physical circumcision failed to introduce any change of heart in God’s Old Testament people. It merely symbolically represented the removal of the sinful nature, that is, the “circumcision of the heart” (see Deut 34:6). According to Romans 6, water baptism accomplishes the same goal – to symbolically represent the removal of the old man and the beginning of a spiritual renewal. Melick concurs, “Circumcision and baptism are two illustrations of salvation.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

The relationship between baptism and circumcision noted in Colossians 2:11-12 is not one reflecting the *means* of accomplishing this spiritual circumcision, but rather one that draws a parallel – both circumcision and baptism are symbols of victory over the flesh, that is, the human sinful nature.

We find support for this conviction by noting that Paul, who vigorously opposed the requirement of physical circumcision for salvation, would hardly replace it with another physical requirement – water baptism. In addition, Paul adds, “in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God.” Thus, we experience the power of the resurrection when we respond *in faith* to the redemptive work of Christ. Moreover, just as we observed in Romans 6, after a brief mention of water baptism, Paul immediately transitions to the theme of our real participation in the resurrection of Christ and mentions baptism no more.[[47]](#footnote-47)

**Titus 3:5-6 –** *He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.*

In this verse, the term that stands out is “washing.” Is this referring to water baptism, and, if so, is Paul claiming that baptism saves? We note that the Greek term here is λουτρόν (*loutron*), not βάπτισμα (*baptisma*). It is most likely that we should understand λουτρόν (*loutron*) in a metaphorical sense and not as physical washing.

Nettles directs our attention to the Old Testament roots of the concept λουτρόν (*loutron*), i.е., “washings.” Water was often used in the Old Testament for ceremonial cleansing and symbolically to represent eschatological renewal (e.g. Ezek 36:25-27). Most likely, Paul is not thinking of water baptism here, but rather of Old Testament ritual cleansing.[[48]](#footnote-48)

We also bear in mind that in verse 6, God “poured out” His Spirit on us. The Holy Spirit is thus represented by water which is poured out on believers. This observation resonates with verse 5 – that the Spirit is the means for accomplishing this “washing” of the believer. In Acts 2:17-18, 33 as well (a quotation of Joel 2), the Spirit is “poured out.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

Therefore, we conclude that in verse 5 the believer is washed not in the baptismal font, but by the Holy Spirit in a spiritual outpouring. Finally, Paul’s assertion that God saved us “not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness” tends to rule out the claim that one must perform a personal, physical act to obtain salvation.[[50]](#footnote-50)

**Ephesians 5:25-26 –** *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.*

Some seek to defend baptismal regeneration by appealing to Ephesians 5:25-26, where it is thought that the words “washing” and “water” refer to baptism. Both words have the Greek article, which indicates a specific object or action, that is, the reader could take it to mean that Paul has a specific cleansing in mind, i.e., water baptism.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In response, we first of all need to clarify that baptism does not cleanse God’s people, but the blood of Christ does. He is the one who “gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her.”[[52]](#footnote-52) We also keep in mind that the Greek term for “washing,” i.е., λουτρόν (*lutron*), differs from the Greek term for baptism, i.е., βάπτισμα (*baptisma*). As we concluded in the previous passage, Paul may be thinking here not of baptism, but of Old Testament cleansing rituals.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Also of note is that in this passage, we learn of the two means whereby the Church is purified and sanctified: the blood of Christ and the Word of God (the gospel). It appears doubtful that Paul would add a third means – water baptism. The word order here reflects Paul’s train of thought: Christ purified the Church with the “washing of water,” that is, “with the word.” Furthermore, the passage does not speak of *individual believers* receiving water baptism, but of the *entire Church* being purified.

Moreover, both in ancient Greece and in ancient Israel, the bride took a ceremonial bath before the wedding ceremony in order to “cleanse” herself for her future husband. It may be that in saying “the washing of water,” Paul is referring to this custom, applying it to the bride of Christ. In this connection, we cite the following prophetic word concerning God’s Old Testament people, which may have served as the starting point for Paul’s thinking.[[54]](#footnote-54)

“Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine,” declares the Lord Yahweh. “Then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil” (Ezek 16:8-9).

**Hebrews 10:22 –** *Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled {clean} from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

According to Hebrews 10:22, “having our hearts sprinkled {clean}” is associated with “our bodies washed with pure water.” Does this mean that the blood of Jesus is made effective at the time the body is immersed in water?[[55]](#footnote-55)

When interpreting this verse, one must respect its context. In verses 19-22, access to God’s presence is described under the figure of entering the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament. Jesus is our high priest, who shed His blood as a sacrifice for sin and inaugurated a new and living way “through the veil, that is, His flesh.” Our response to His redemptive work is also expressed in terms of the Old Testament sacrificial system – we receive the sprinkling of blood (see Ex 24:8) and the washing of water (see Lev 14:9; Num 19:8; Deut 23:11). However, the text does not indicate that this Old Testament ritual is fulfilled now through water baptism.

We also know that the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was fulfilled in Christ and is no longer in effect. The author of Hebrews is simply employing an Old Testament figure to dramatize our salvation.[[56]](#footnote-56) Even if the words “our bodies washed with pure water” refers to water baptism, that action follows the “sprinkling of hearts” and may well merely serve as a confirmation of a salvation already received by faith.

**1 Corinthians 6:11 –** *Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

In 1 Corinthians 6:11 we note that the term “washed” is associated with “sanctified” and “justified,” which may indicate that the latter are attained through the former, that is, through water baptism.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Gordon Fee responds, “Paul does not in fact say ‘you were baptized,’ which he was perfectly capable of doing if baptism were his concern.”[[58]](#footnote-58) He concludes that the phrases “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” and “in the Spirit of God” refer not to the baptismal formula, but to the means by which the “washing,” sanctification” and “justification” takes place – through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.[[59]](#footnote-59) It is also significant to remember what cleanses the believer – the blood of Jesus (Heb 9:14).

**Galatians 3:26-27 –** *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

In chapter 3 of Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, he discusses the role of the Law in the life of believers. It serves as a “tutor” to bring us to Christ by faith. Since we acquire salvation and adoption into God’s family exclusively through Christ, the apostle can confidently claim, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” Here of note is that faith alone qualifies us for this adoption.

We must further examine the context of this passage. Paul’s goal is to define the true descendants of Abraham and the heirs of his promise. Earlier in chapter 3, Paul revealed that Abraham’s only descendant and heir is his “seed,” i.e., Jesus Christ. Therefore, to be Abraham’s heir, one must be “in Christ.”

In order to assure believers that they are truly “in Him,” Paul appeals to the universal practice of water baptism. Notice that he already declared that his readers are children of God by faith alone without mentioning baptism. Then, he introduces baptism into the discussion: *“*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” He describes those in Christ under the figure of “immersion” into Him – typified first through water baptism, then through adorning clothing. In this pictorial fashion, Paul assists his readers to visualize themselves as those *located in* the “seed of Abraham” and thereby see themselves as heirs of Abraham’s promise.

**2. Baptism as a Means of Forgiveness of Sins and Regeneration**

Quite early in church history, the teaching of salvation through baptism appeared.[[60]](#footnote-60) Some Church Fathers associated water baptism with forgiveness of sins[[61]](#footnote-61) and deliverance from death and condemnation.[[62]](#footnote-62) In addition, baptism was thought to result in rebirth[[63]](#footnote-63) and receiving the Holy Spirit.[[64]](#footnote-64) It unites the baptized individual with Christ.[[65]](#footnote-65) The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed declares, “We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.” At times, Church Fathers attributed to the baptismal waters themselves sanctifying powers.[[66]](#footnote-66) However, the Fathers taught that baptism was the *means* of salvation, but not its *basis*. Its basis is Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary. In addition, repentance and faith were required before reception of water baptism.

We will examine the views of several Christian denominations, especially in regard to the necessity of baptism for salvation.

**а. Eastern Orthodox Teaching**

One of the main commentators on the Eastern Church’s view of the relationship between baptism and salvation was John of Damascus, author of *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*. He writes, “We confess one baptism for the remission of sins and for life eternal…. We receive the first fruits of the Holy Spirit through baptism, and the second birth is for us the beginning and seal and security and illumination of another life.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

Sergey Bulgakov describes the Orthodox view in more detail.[[68]](#footnote-68) Along with the Damascene, he claims that baptism results in the salvation of the soul: “*Baptism is* spiritual rebirth, by which in Christ the natural man is put to death, along with his innate original sin, by the power that is supplied by Him, and is born again. It is the assimilation of the saving power of the redemptive work of Christ.” Furthermore, only a priest ordained in the apostolic succession has the right to perform baptisms. However, unlike the opinion of some others, Bulgakov allows that “*Every* baptism in the Name of the Holy Trinity is valid, not only in Orthodoxy, but beyond it as well.” In addition, in the absence of a priest, a lay person may baptize “by virtue of the general Christian priesthood.”

Metropolitan Ilarion further clarifies this position. He explains why Orthodox immerse the candidate three times: “The threeford baptism represents the three days that Jesus spent in the earth after His death on the cross.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Yet, like John of Damascus, he asserts that baptism cannot be repeated (if done in the name of the Holy Trinity): “Christ did not die three times, but once. Therefore, baptism is performed only once.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Ilarion also comments on the sanctifying power of the baptismal waters. They receive grace by virtue of Christ being immersed in water: “Christ came to John to be baptized… in order to sanctify the waters of the river by His immersion in the Jordan, to bestow on them His energy and power, and to make them life-giving and life-bearing.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

Moreover, Ilarion speaks of the necessity to forsake one’s old manner of life after baptism. Baptism is a covenant between God and its recipients, so that they, in the words of Gregory Naziazen, would achieve “great purity.”[[72]](#footnote-72) In addition, those who receive water baptism have died with Christ to sin and were raised with Him to new life.

Ilarion insists, “Without baptism, salvation is impossible,” except in cases of “baptism by blood,” i.e., martyrdom.[[73]](#footnote-73) However, Orthodox Tradition fails to comment on the fate of the non-baptized. Furthermore, in distinction from the Western Church, chrismation (i.e., confirmation) follows immediately after water baptism. Even though immersion is the preferred method, “in the Orthodox Church pouring is often performed.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

According to Orthodoxy, water baptism results not only in regeneration (which is called the “first resurrection”),[[75]](#footnote-75) but also liberation from slavery to sin and participation in so-called “God’s energies,” which enter the soul and begin the process of deification.[[76]](#footnote-76) Water baptism begins the restoration of God’s image in people, yet the sinful nature is not eradicated immediately, since God desires the free participation of His people in the quest for overcoming sin.[[77]](#footnote-77)

As far as the transmission of grace through water baptism, the Orthodox and Catholics share the concept of *ex opere operato*,[[78]](#footnote-78) according to which, if sacraments are properly performed, they act independently of the spiritual condition of either the officiating priest or the recipient (with some exceptions).[[79]](#footnote-79)

In general, Orthodoxy rejects the need for faith in administering sacraments. Nevertheless, some Orthodox theologians do ascribe importance to that element. Nassif, for example, defends the position that faith is necessary for baptism to be effective – either the faith of the one receiving baptism, or the faith of that individual’s godparents.[[80]](#footnote-80)

**b. Roman Catholic Teaching**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides this summary statement about the effect of water baptism:

The fruit of Baptism, or baptismal grace, is a rich reality that includes forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins, birth into the new life by which man becomes an adoptive son of the Father, a member of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit. By this very fact the person baptized is incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ, and made a sharer in the priesthood of Christ.[[81]](#footnote-81)

So then, Catholics teach that baptism is necessary for salvation.[[82]](#footnote-82) If people failed to receive baptism, they can still benefit from the sacrament if they desired to receive it (the baptism of desire) or if they suffered martyrdom (baptism of blood).[[83]](#footnote-83)

Although baptism provides forgiveness of sins, Catholics teach that “temporary consequences” of sins committed remain, such as sickness, death, the flesh, and vices.[[84]](#footnote-84) Therefore, after baptism the newly baptized must strive for holiness, submitting to the Catholic hierarchy. He or she must remain in the grace of baptism until death.[[85]](#footnote-85)

The Catholic writer D. Mollat comments on the sanctifying power of the water.[[86]](#footnote-86) The waters of baptism possess “supernatural power.” It is “a divine water, poured out on the body only in order to purify the heart.” Nevertheless, he clarifies that the water becomes life-giving not by magic, but in connection with the redemptive work of Christ.

In the Catholic Church, newly baptized adults immediately receive the sacraments of confirmation and the Eucharist. Infants receive only a “preliminary” anointing, which differs from confirmation. Confirmation is conferred at age 12.

As we have stated, Catholics share with Orthodoxy the concept of *ex opere operato.*[[87]](#footnote-87) They differ, though, in that Catholics give a greater place to faith. We read in the Catholic Catechism, “Always, Baptism is seen as connected with faith,”[[88]](#footnote-88) and, “Baptism is the sacrament of faith.”[[89]](#footnote-89) However, the faith that baptism requires is the faith of the Church: “The catechumen or the godparent is asked: ‘What do you ask of God's Church?’ the response is: ‘Faith!’”[[90]](#footnote-90) Duplacy explains, “By his baptism, man shares fully in the baptism of the Church and of Christ. His personal faith then becomes the faith of Christ and of the Church…. It is this sort of faith that saves.”[[91]](#footnote-91)

**c. Lutheran Teaching**

Along with the Catholics, Lutherans also affirm that baptism provides forgiveness of original sin and spiritual rebirth. Together with the Church Fathers, Luther believed that water baptism was necessary for salvation. He said, “If a person wants to be saved, let him be baptized.”[[92]](#footnote-92) At the same time, Luther insisted that baptism must be accompanied by faith in the recipient: “Even if a person is baptized, but is without faith, he is lost.”[[93]](#footnote-93) Additionally, Luther considered water baptism to be a dying to sin and a rising to new life.[[94]](#footnote-94) Finally, according to the Augsburg Confession, “Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God’s grace” (*Article 9*).

Unlike Luther’s teaching, modern Lutherans in general defend the view that adults are saved by faith alone and the baptism is a means to strengthen faith.[[95]](#footnote-95) Mueller defines the role of baptism for adults: “Baptism is not absolutely necessary…. On the other hand, it is likewise true that a sincere believer never despises the ordinances of Christ... so that a true member of the Church neglects neither Baptism nor the Lord’s Supper.”[[96]](#footnote-96)

Unlike Catholic or Orthodox faith, Lutherans ascribe the effects of baptism not to apostolic succession, but to the efficacy of God’s Word. Water baptism benefits the recipients because it is performed according to the words of Christ, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). Luther taught that the water does not save, but the “Word in the water,” which is received by faith: “Baptism is water with the Word of God, and this is the essence and whole substance of Baptism.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

**d. Restoration Movement**

In the 19th century in the USA, a new movement arose called the “Restoration Movement” headed by Alexander Campbell. At the present time, this movement is represented by two Christian denominations: the Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ. Let us examine their history and teachings.[[98]](#footnote-98)

At that time, newly converted individuals typically received Christ as Savior at the conclusion of the preaching service through earnest prayer at the “altar.” Campbell objected that this custom gave the new convert only a *subjective* assurance of salvation. He felt that a more *objective* assurance was needed, which the rite of baptism provides. Although it was agreed that individuals are saved by faith alone in Christ, their salvation received confirmation through baptism leading to a greater level of assurance. In Campbell’s words, “Ministers of the gospel ought to use baptism as a means of formally assuring the believer that his sins have been forgiven.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

However, Campbell eventually abandoned his original views and began to teach that salvation occurred at the moment of water baptism. At present, some adherents of this movement have already minimized the importance of water baptism in regard to salvation, namely among the Disciples of Christ.[[100]](#footnote-100)

According to the teachings of the Restoration Movement, salvation comes exclusively by grace through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It is acquired exclusively by faith. Yet, faith receives salvation at the moment of water baptism. In this way, baptism “saves.”[[101]](#footnote-101) So then, a distinction is made between the *means* of salvation (grace through faith) and the *moment* of salvation (the moment of receiving baptism). The baptismal candidate can experience both simultaneously.

The Restoration Movement refuses to baptize infants – only adults and older children that are able to consciously believe. In addition, some members of this movement believe that one must be baptized in line with the teachings of this movement in order to have a valid baptism.[[102]](#footnote-102)

**e. James Dunn**

The well known English theologian, James Dunn, proposed a novel approach to understanding water baptism that he called “conversion-initiation.” He observed in the New Testament that conversion to Christ involves four elements: repentance, faith, water baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit. In every biblical example, these items are mentioned or implied, and they occur over a short period of time.

Based on this observation, Dunn concluded that one may view these events holistically – as one event. Together, they make up a single experience of conversion to Christ. All are necessary for a complete and genuine experience of conversion. Water baptism, then, is necessary as an expression of saving faith. In Dunn’s words,

Baptism properly performed is for the NT essentially the act of faith and repentance – the actualization of saving faith without which, usually, commitment to Jesus as Lord does not come to its necessary expression.[[103]](#footnote-103)

**3. Baptism as a Sign and Seal of Salvation**

The Reformed and Presbyterian congregations expresses their view of water baptism by the phrase “sign and seal of salvation.” The term “sign” indicates that baptism is a visible sign of the salvation that believers have received by faith. In the words of R. C. Sproul, “(Baptism) is a sign of cleansing and the remission of our sins. It also signifies being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, being buried and raised together with Christ, being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, being adopted into the family of God, and being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”[[104]](#footnote-104) He adds that baptism itself does not transmit grace for salvation, but only symbolizes the grace already received from God by faith.

The Reformed theologian John Murray describes the idea of “sign of salvation” in the following words: “(God) not only unites His people to Christ but He also advertises that great truth by an ordinance which portrays visibly to our senses the reality of this grace.”[[105]](#footnote-105)

Furthermore, baptism is also a “seal” of salvation. Shedd comments on this: “It is like the official seal on a legal document. The presence of the seal inspires confidence in the genuineness of the title deed; the absence of the seal awakens doubts and fears.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Baptism is God’s guarantee that salvation is in Christ. Murray also unpacks the idea of “seal”: “As a seal it authenticates, confirms, guarantees the reality and security of this covenant grace.”[[107]](#footnote-107) Thus, water baptism strengthens the faith of the baptized individual and establishes this individual in the Lord.

Until now, we have described the Reformed position in symbolic terms as the “sign and seal” of salvation. Some Reformed thinkers, though, suggest that baptism may indeed communicate grace from God. The Westminster Confession states, “By the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time” (28.6).[[108]](#footnote-108)

The former president of Princeton University, Charles Hodges, joins with this opinion:

Baptism, however, is not only a sign and seal; it is also a means of grace, because in it the blessings which it signifies are conveyed, and the promises of which it is the seal, are assured or fulfilled to those who are baptized, provided they believe.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Along with others, Hodge qualifies that God may apply the benefits of baptism to the one baptized at any time of life. He may even save an individual independent of the grace received at baptism: “The Reformed, at least, do not believe that those blessings are tied to the ordinance of baptism, so that the reception of baptism is necessary to a participation of the spiritual benefits which it symbolizes.”[[110]](#footnote-110)

**4. Baptism as a Symbol of Salvation**

The most widespread opinion among Evangelical believers in Christ (especially Baptists and Pentecostals) is that water baptism is a symbolic representation of cleansing from sin and identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.

During the Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli restored this teaching to the Church. He wrote, “Water baptism cannot contribute in any way to the washing away of sin,”[[111]](#footnote-111) and, “nor is the one born again by baptism.”[[112]](#footnote-112) Cottrell comments, “Without a doubt Zwingli’s doctrine of baptism was a radical revision of 1500 years of Christian thinking.”[[113]](#footnote-113)

Several proofs are offered in favor of the position that water baptism is a symbol of salvation already received. Scripture connects salvation with repentance, faith, and sacraments, namely with water baptism. However, contrary to Dunn’s teaching, salvation is not a process consisting of several events, but is actualized in one moment of time. There must exist one point in time when a person transfers from death to life, from an unsaved state to a saved state. The Lutheran theologian Mueller correctly asserts, “Conversion does not take place by stages, or degrees, but instantaneously.”[[114]](#footnote-114) Moreover, “According to Scripture, it is impossible for a person to be in a middle state even for a moment, for there is no middle ground between belief and unbelief, between life and death.”[[115]](#footnote-115)

Therefore, we must determine in what exact moment a person receives salvation: at the moment of repentance, faith, or water baptism. Since the great majority of verses about salvation mention faith, and usually faith alone, we conclude that salvation occurs at the moment when an individual believes in Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior.[[116]](#footnote-116)

We can confirm this thesis with specific passages of Scripture. Cocoris lists the following: “At the point of faith a person is said to be saved (Acts 16:31), given eternal life (John 3:16), becomes a child of God (Galatians 3:26; John 1:12), passes from death to life (John 5:24), is justified (Romans 3:28; 5:1), receives the righteousness of Christ (Romans 4:3–5; Philippians 3:9), is forgiven (Acts 10:43; Luke 7:48–50), etc.”[[117]](#footnote-117)

Also significant is that the apostle Paul did not lay great weight on the necessity of baptism. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, he writes, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” Clearly, for Paul preaching he gospel was primary and water baptism was secondary. Cocoris points out that Paul did not even consider baptism to be one of the components of the gospel: “Christ did not send me to *baptize*, but to *preach the gospel*,” thus making a distinction between them.[[118]](#footnote-118) In the words of B. Pass, “Paul could never say that he was not sent to baptize if baptism were necessary for membership in the New Covenant.”[[119]](#footnote-119)

We also take into consideration that Cornelius’ household was saved without experiencing water baptism, which was evidenced by their receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47). Subsequently, the Jerusalem church considered as evidence of their salvation not their reception of baptism, but their reception of the Spirit (Acts 11:17-18).[[120]](#footnote-120) Hull adds that Abraham received justification by faith before receiving the rite of circumcision.[[121]](#footnote-121) Buse notes that the 120 disciples of Jesus who received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost likely never received Christian baptism, yet, undoubtedly, they were saved.[[122]](#footnote-122)

Another argument against the sacramental position is that Paul, who so vigorously opposed circumcision as a requirement for salvation, would hardly substitute one rite, i.e., circumcision, for another – water baptism. Finally, from a logical point of view, those who come for water baptism have already repented and believed. Otherwise, they would not seek baptism. Therefore, they have already demonstrated true conversion to Christ and are therefore already saved before baptism.[[123]](#footnote-123)

If water baptism is a symbol, then what does it symbolize? It symbolizes washing away sin (see Acts 22:16), burial of the old man, and resurrection into new life (see Rom 6:4).

Why is baptism important to observe? First, the Lord Jesus Himself commanded His disciples to practice it (see Matt 28:19). Therefore, submitting to baptism is a step of obedience to Christ. Second, baptism has been the custom of the Church for two thousand years and practiced in almost every Christian denomination. It serves as an expression of the unity of the Church. Third, water baptism is an external expression of the internal change that occurs in new believers – they have received forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ.

In addition, baptism also draws attention to the historical character of Christian faith. Christian faith radically differs from other religions. Other faiths base their doctrines on the personal convictions of their leaders. Christianity, however, is based on what God has done in history. The coming of God’s Son to earth was a historical event, as was His death and resurrection from the dead. In order to underscore the objective nature of Christian faith, God requires believers to observe this practice and participate in a physical symbol of Christ’s completed work. Finally, the Church takes opportunity through this public ceremony to give new believers a platform for testifying of their faith.

So then, we conclude that baptism is a means to express our faith and serves as a symbol the salvation already received by faith. It is not required for obtaining eternal life. At the same time, we wish to modify our position to include helpful insight from other viewpoints and thus embrace the entire biblical witness.

Although the “symbolic” position is the most convincing, we should not underestimate the close connection between salvation and baptism to which Scripture testifies. Some passages advanced in defense of the sacramental position are difficult to completely explain as symbolic, such as Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, and 1 Pet 3:21. In addition, in Romans 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:11-13, Paul makes a close connection between water baptism and the believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection.

We also note that in the New Testament Church, new converts were baptized immediately upon conversion. This suggests that new converts benefited not only from an inner, subjective experience of conversion to Christ, but also from the outer, objective experience of water baptism for establishing their faith. It is interesting to note that Martin Luther also shared this concern. Although his theory of “Word in water” lacks biblical support, he shows insight in the following statement. In order to strengthen and establish faith, “it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart.”[[124]](#footnote-124)

We can concur with Alexander Campbell, then, in his earlier view of baptism, that the call to repentance conventionally practiced in the Church may be inadequate to confirm a person in faith. It is desirable to add a physical act. Water baptism is meant to fill that role. It is highly likely that our failure to baptize immediately after conversion, which was the norm in early Christianity, is one of the reasons why many new converts do not continue in the faith. However, we do not embrace Campbell’s later view that salvation *depends* on baptism.

Our conclusion finds resonance with Reformed theology, that water baptism is the “sign and seal” of salvation. In other words, baptism serves as a means to strengthen and establish the faith of a new convert. By this means, God confirms His promise of salvation and thereby more firmly grounds the faith of the new believer. At the same time, we do not support the view of some Reformed thinkers, that water baptism actually transmits God’s grace.

So then, we support the symbolic view that a new convert is saved at the moment of faith before submitting to baptism. Yet, approximating the time of conversion to the event of baptism can provide the new believer with a more objective experience of conversion. Therefore, persons experience *actual* salvation before baptism, but receive *practical* benefit from associating (but not equating) their salvation experience with water baptism.

This is possibly what Ananias had in mind when he said to repentant Saul, “Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). The New Testament Church may have employed the moment of receiving baptism to perform the *formal* act of “calling on His name” (Acts 22:16) and “appealing to God for a good conscience” (1 Pet 3:21).

We can illustrate this view by reflecting on the marriage customs in the Slavic world. In order to officially register one’s marriage, the couple must appear before the marriage bureau where they legally form the union. From that moment, they are fully married. Then, a Christian couple will appear before their local church in a marriage ceremony. Thus, the couple is *officially* married before the marriage bureau, but *formally* declare their marriage in a church ceremony.

We conclude our discussion with one more consideration on baptism. Some equate baptism with making a covenant with God, appealing to 1 Peter 3:21: “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.” This conviction is reinforced by the fact that the term “appeal” can also be translated “promise” or “pledge.” Nevertheless, the New Testament never speaks of baptism as a covenant relationship. At the time of baptism, the candidates do indeed dedicate their lives to the Lord, but it is misguided to call this a covenant. The only covenant that the New Testament speaks of is the one established by the shedding of Christ’s blood for the forgiveness of sins (Lk 22:20).

### C. Candidates for Water Baptism

Another controversial issue in the application of water baptism is the question, “Who can be baptized?” Some support infant baptism, while other insist that baptism can only be administered to those who have displayed personal faith.

This question is related to our previous discussion of the significance of water baptism. Those who adhere to infant baptism believe that it communicates to them grace for salvation, while those who baptize only believers see it as a symbol that the candidate is already saved. In addition, those who baptize only believers debate as to the age baptism is permitted. In other words, should we baptize older children, or just adults?

**1. Infants or Only Believers?**

Many proponents of infant baptism feel that water baptism is necessary for forgiveness of original sin and for the salvation of souls. Augustine was a leading figure in this regard.[[125]](#footnote-125) The Catholic Church (along with several more traditional protestant denominations) believe that infants inherit the guilt of Adam and need forgiveness of original sin through baptism. Eastern Orthodox, however, feel that infants are not subject to inherited guilt, yet water baptism does provide them with the new birth. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession states, “Children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God’s grace” (*Article 9*).[[126]](#footnote-126)

However, on biblical grounds adherents of believer’s baptism reject the thesis that infants receive salvation through the baptismal rite. Our examination of key biblical texts performed earlier leads us to conclude that water baptism does not communicate saving grace. We will go on to show as well that baptism of infants is inappropriate.

Reformed denominations work off the assumption by Calvin and Zwingli that children of believing parents are automatically included in the covenant with God as is was in the Old Testament and are worthy candidates for infant baptism. Charles Hodge defends this view: “When a believer adopts the covenant of grace, he brings his children within that covenant, in the sense that God promises to give them, in his own good time, all the benefits of redemption, provided they do not willingly renounce their baptismal engagements.”[[127]](#footnote-127)

The grace proffered through baptism remains in the baptized child, yet it does not act until the child exercises personal faith. At that moment, the grace of baptism is released to regenerate the child (see our qualification later[[128]](#footnote-128)). In Calvin’s words, “Children are baptized for future repentance and faith. Though these are not yet formed in them, yet the seed of both lies hid in them by the secret operation of the Spirit.”[[129]](#footnote-129)

In addition, a close association is made between baptism and circumcision. In the Old Testament, circumcision served as a sign of the infant’s acceptance into the people of God. In a similar fashion, water baptism is thought to fulfill the same role – inclusion of the infant into God’s New Testament people.

In refutation of the Reformed position on circumcision, we note that infant baptism does not replace physical circumcision. This is shown by the fact that Christian Jewish parents in the first century both circumcised and baptized their children. Additionally, in Paul’s battle against those who required circumcision for salvation, he never argues that circumcision is not necessary because baptism has replaced it.[[130]](#footnote-130) We must also consider the unlikely possibility that Paul, after vigorously refuting the teaching of the necessity of circumcision for salvation, would have replaced it with a requirement for another physical act – water baptism.

The truth is that circumcision not only indicated inclusion in the covenant, but also symbolized the removal of the sinful nature and spiritual rebirth (Deut 34:6). According to Scripture, water baptism corresponds only to the second aspect – a symbol of the removal of the sinful nature and spiritual rebirth (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12-13). Ware agrees:

The parallel, then, between circumcision and baptism in the new covenant is not between physical circumcision and infant baptism; rather, the parallel is between spiritual circumcision of the heart and baptism which signifies regeneration, faith and union with Christ.[[131]](#footnote-131)

We also argue that the New Testament established a new means for inclusion in God’s people – not in a physical sense by being born into a certain family, but by spiritual rebirth through faith in Jesus, with whom God the Father established the covenant (see Gal 3:16, 29). Wellum correctly claims, “To be a member of Abraham’s family now is not tied to a specific physical lineage… only through faith union in Christ.”[[132]](#footnote-132)

Adherents of infant baptism appeal to Jesus’ attitude toward children. He always received them warmly and rebuked those who attempted to hinder them from coming to Him. In Matthew 19:14, our Lord said of children, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Then, He laid His hands of them, which some interpret as a symbol of water baptism.

On the other hand, we must consider the following. First, in Hebrew culture it was customary to invoke blessings on descendants (see Gen 9:26-27; 27; 28:1-4; 48:14-18; *Soferim*, 18.5). Therefore, Jesus’ actions here were typical of the times and do not validate infant baptism. Second, most commentators agree that Jesus’ goal here was not to set a precedent for water baptism, but rather to make the point that adults need to become as children to enter the kingdom of God.

A key consideration in this discussion is that the book of Acts records several instances where an entire household received water baptism. Did this include baptism of infants as well? Such “household baptisms” occurred in Acts 10:47-48 (the household of Cornelius), Acts 16:13-15 (the household of Lydia), and Acts 16:30-33 (the household of the Philippian jailer). Another instance is noted in 1 Corinthians 1:16 (the household of Stephanas).

On the other hand, Acts 18:8 sheds more light on the question: “Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household.” Here, the expression “all household” refers only to those who understood the Word and believed. We see a similar example in the case of the Philippian jailer, when Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house… and immediately he was baptized, he and all his {household}… having believed in God with his whole household” (Acts 16:32-34). In this example, the entire household heard the Word, believed, and was baptized. It is logical to conclude that we are dealing here with individuals older than infants. Finally, Cornelius and “all his household” feared the Lord (Acts 10:2), which again rules out infants.[[133]](#footnote-133)

We can cite other New Testament examples outside the book of Acts where the expression “all household” excludes infants. In John 4:53, the royal official believed with his whole household. In 1 Corinthians 16:15, we learn that the household of Stephanas had dedicated themselves to serve the saints.[[134]](#footnote-134)

In Acts 2:39, Peter announced that the promise of salvation extends to “you and your children and for all who are far off.” Some conclude that Peter claimed that forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit was being offered to children (including infants) of these new converts through water baptism.

However, although Peter did offer the promise of the Spirit to the children of new converts, he did not indicate how they would receive that blessing.[[135]](#footnote-135) It is fair to assume that the children of these newly converted must fulfill the same conditions that their parents did on Pentecost Day, including repentance. Peter also added, “…as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” Only individuals older than infants can personally respond to God’s call.[[136]](#footnote-136) More likely, when Peter said “you and your children and for all who are far off,” he meant that the gospel will spread over time and space. It will be available both to future generations and to those geographically distant from Jerusalem.

Next, in 1 Corinthians 7:14 we read that children of believers are “holy.” Does this mean that they qualify for the rite of baptism? The *Westminster Confession of Faith* declares, “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.”[[137]](#footnote-137)

Here we must note that the same word that describes the condition of children of believing parents, that is ἁγία (*hagia)*, i.е., “holy,” is used in its verbal form in relation to the unbelieving spouse: “The unbelieving husband is *sanctified* through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is *sanctified* through her believing husband.” Yet, verse 16 informs us, “How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”

So then, the “sanctification” of the unbelieving spouse does not mean he or she is saved and a worthy candidate for water baptism. Similarly, the “sanctification” of the children of believers does not mean that they are saved or candidates for baptism. It simply refers to the fact that the believing spouse has a *sanctifying* *influence* on the family.

Another key question in the discussion of infant baptism is that of faith. Does the infant need faith to be baptized? Catholics and Orthodox believe that sacraments operate automatically without the absolute need for faith.[[138]](#footnote-138) Catholics also hold, though, that a candidate can be baptized through the faith of the Church,[[139]](#footnote-139) or believe that the absence of active resistance by the candidate is sufficient for grace to be transmitted.[[140]](#footnote-140)

Lutherans, in general, hold that infants themselves have the ability to believe.[[141]](#footnote-141) They cite the following Scriptures in support: Matthew 18:6; 19:14; Psalm 8:2; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16-17.[[142]](#footnote-142) Luther himself stated that he could not justify the baptism of infants if they could not, in fact, believe.[[143]](#footnote-143) The Lutheran theologian Jacobs suggests that for an infant, knowing about the object of faith is not as important as having an attitude of trust, which infants do possess.[[144]](#footnote-144) Some Lutherans propose that faith itself can be communicated to the infant during the act of baptism.[[145]](#footnote-145)

Beasley-Murray, though, affirms that infants cannot meet the conditions for receiving baptism.[[146]](#footnote-146) In particular, they cannot “appeal to God for a good conscience” (1 Pet 3:21), repent (Acts 2:39), believe (Gal 3:26; Col 2:12), or call on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). Furthermore, in Scripture we often encounter the phrase “believe and be baptized,” and faith is always mentioned first (e.g. Acts 2:38; 8:12).

Some defenders of infant baptism fail to appreciate that faith without an object of faith is useless. Scripture demands, “Believe *in the Lord Jesus*, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Genuine faith requires a certain knowledge of the object of faith (see 2 Tim 3:15). Infants are not able to believe in Jesus, and therefore they are not suitable candidates for the ordinance of baptism.

Infant baptism has a long history in the church and finds support in church tradition and the teaching of the Fathers. We can cite the following:[[147]](#footnote-147) *Apostolic Constitutions*, 21 (3rd c.), Origen, *Commentary on Romans,* 5.9*,* and *Homilies on Luke*, 19 (3rd c.); Cyprian*, Letters,* 58, 63 (3rd c.); Jerome, *Epistles,* 107.6(4th-5th c.); and Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 2.51, and *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin*, 21 (4th-5th c.). The Council of Carthage (418 г.) anathematized those who forbade the baptism of infants.

In spite of the historical considerations just mentioned, it is problematic to validate infant baptism. From a biblical perspective, we know that all baptisms recorded in Scripture were performed on believers. The New Testament contains neither a concrete teaching on infant baptism, nor a clear example of that practice. Although the practice of infant baptism dates back to an early period of church history, it does not predate the New Testament, which is the only reliable source for Christian doctrine and practice.

Other historical arguments weight against infant baptism as well. Among some early witnesses, we see no mention of the practice, such as: Clement of Rome, Polycarp, *Epistle of “Barnabas,”* *Pastor of Hermas*, Justin Martyr, and Clement of Alexandria.[[148]](#footnote-148) In this regard, George Beasley-Murray states that the desire to baptize infants grew steadily among the laity, and the church hierarchy failed to curb that desire, but rather endorsed the practice.[[149]](#footnote-149)

In addition, some Church Fathers actually challenged the practice of infant baptism. For example, Tertullian wrote about baptizing infants, “Let them ‘come,’ then, while they are growing up; let them ‘come’ while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ” (*On Baptism*, 18). Gregory Nazianzen shared this opinion:

But in respect of others (i.e., not in immediate mortal danger) I give my advice to wait till the end of the third year, or a little more or less, when they may be able to listen and to answer something about the Sacrament; that, even though they do not perfectly understand it, yet at any rate they may know the outlines; and then to sanctify them in soul and body with the great sacrament of our consecration (*Orations*, 40.28).

We can add to this testimony the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which makes reference to “one Baptism for the remission of sins.” Wright observes that the Eastern Fathers, who hosted this Council, did not believe in inherited depravity of children or in their need of forgiveness. Therefore, in their mind the “one Baptism for the remission of sins” can only apply to those who have consciously sinned, which excludes infants.[[150]](#footnote-150)

Another evidence for early church practices is found in graveyard inscriptions, dated from the third century, which provide us insight into the Early Church practice.[[151]](#footnote-151) Often (but not always), these inscriptions inform us when a child died and when he or she was baptized. In every case where these dates are given, the parents baptized the child soon before death. No instance was discovered where parents baptized a child earlier. We also see examples where young people or adults were baptized right before death, which indicates that they did not receive baptism as infants.

Also important to note is that the issue of baptizing only believers caused a serious conflict between the so-called “Magisterial Reformation” and the “Radical Reformation.” The latter, which consisted basically of Anabaptists, rejected the baptism of infants and was consequently persecuted by the former. Zwingli initially baptized only believers since he considered baptism to be a symbol of grace already received. However, in reaction to the Anabaptists, he altered his view and began to baptize infants.[[152]](#footnote-152)

It is curious to note that one of the most famous and influential Reformed theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, held to views on baptism contrary to his theological comrades and, in the end, rejected the practice of infant baptism since it was not supported by the biblical witness.[[153]](#footnote-153)

The final item in our refutation of infant baptism is that in our experience, we observe that those who receive baptism as infants do not always become true believers or demonstrate a Christian lifestyle. Therefore, infant baptism actually creates the danger of deceiving people into thinking that they are Christians by virtue of their water baptism when they, in fact, have never truly been born again.[[154]](#footnote-154)

In light of our discussion above, we conclude that water baptism is appropriate only for those who have consciously believed in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, which excludes infants. We will discuss the fate of infants who die in infancy or early childhood in a later chapter.

**2. Youth?**

The Bible does not give specific instructions about the baptism of older children and youth. Therefore, we must rely on basic principles and common sense. If we claim that water baptism is an expression of faith for the newly converted individual, then we must allow that the requirement for baptism be as follows.

First, the individual must be sufficiently mature to make a personal decision for Christ. Second, this person must be able to conceptualize the significance of baptism, that is, what it symbolizes. Thus, an individual of any age who meets these conditions is a candidate for water baptism. It is best not to set a specific age limit, but rather to assess each situation independently. The determination depends totally on the maturity level of that individual.

### D. Methods of Baptizing

**1. When to Baptize?**

In determining the right method for baptism, we must also consider the timing of the event. In other words, how soon after conversion should one seek baptism?

In the Early Church, the so-called “catechumens” went through a three year period of study and preparation for this rite.[[155]](#footnote-155) It was sometimes thought that sins committed after water baptism could not be forgiven.[[156]](#footnote-156) Therefore, catechumens were subjected to an intense preparatory period. In this way, the Church could be assured that this person’s conversion was genuine and sincere. In addition, the participants in the Council of Nicaea were concerned that a quick baptism would allow new converts to obtain high posts in the Church before they were ready. Additionally, a thorough doctrinal preparation of new converts would prevent the spread of Gnosticism, which was a major threat to the Church at that time.[[157]](#footnote-157) The contemporary Church follows a similar model – adults typically complete a preparatory class in Christian faith before receiving baptism.

Although this practice appears reasonable and is supported by age-old Christian tradition, it deviates from the clear biblical model, where a new believer received water baptism as soon as possible after conversion. We note that new believers in the apostolic time needed instruction in the faith just as much as new believers today. Yet, the earliest disciples of Jesus thought it more necessary to baptize immediately than to subject converts to preliminary teaching.

In addition, we must understand that one does not need an exhaustive grasp of Christian doctrine to be baptized, but merely a comprehension and acceptance of the basic gospel facts. Water baptism is no more than a pictorial representation of cleansing from sin, the death and burial of the old person, and resurrection into newness of life. Therefore, if persons understand the gospel (which is essential for being saved anyway), they can also understand the significance of water baptism.

**2. How to Baptize?**

**а. Sprinkling and Pouring**

One method employed for performing the baptismal rite is sprinkling or pouring water on the candidate.[[158]](#footnote-158) Adherents of this view argue that in some biblical examples of water baptism, the amount of water available was insufficient to perform immersion. For example, 3000 persons required baptism on Pentecost Day (Acts 2). A little later, 5000 persons believed at one time (Acts 4). Phillip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert (Acts 8). They also cite the baptism of Cornelius’ household and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16).[[159]](#footnote-159)

We find this argument unconvincing, being merely an assumption. The biblical narrative does not always give such details about the events it records. The biblical writers thought it unnecessary to comment on the availability of water. Moreover, the amount of water needed to baptize one individual is not much. If many are baptized in the same water, the amount of water needed does not increase.

Another argument employed in defense of sprinkling or pouring is the mention of sprinkling in the Old Testament.[[160]](#footnote-160) For example, in Ezekiel 36:25 God sprinkles pure water to purify His people from idols. On the other hand, we are dealing in Ezekiel 36 with a metaphor that symbolizes purification of the soul. The reference here is not to water baptism.

Other Old Testament examples of cleansing by sprinkling are found in the following texts: Exodus 24:6-8; Leviticus 14:4-7, 49-53; and Numbers 8:7; 19:18-19; 31:19-23.[[161]](#footnote-161) Some presume that John the Baptist, Jesus, and His disciples would naturally follow the Old Testament precedent of sprinkling. However, this is another assumption. Jesus and His disciples did not always blindly follow Old Testament practices or rabbinic traditions (see Mk 2:18-22ff). Unlike Old Testament cleansing rites, John’s baptism and Christian baptism represent a radical life-change, which is poorly reflected in sprinkling.

It is also argued that the figure of sprinkling is used for how the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin (Heb 9:13, 14, 22; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Pet 1:2). Since water baptism also represents forgiveness of sins, why not perform it by sprinkling?[[162]](#footnote-162) In response, we recall that the references to the sprinkling of Christ’s blood are not associated with water baptism, but with the Old Testament sacrificial system, where the blood of sacrificial animals was sprinkled.

Hodge claims that the biblical summons to “wash yourselves” can be done in various ways – by immersion, sprinkling, or pouring: “By washing is meant any such application of water to the body as effects its purification. This may be done by immersion, affusion, or sprinkling.”[[163]](#footnote-163) Yet, Hodge fails to appreciate that baptism also represents burial and resurrection (Rom 6:4-5), which is better demonstrated by immersion.

Furthermore, proponents of sprinkling or pouring compare water baptism with the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is often depicted in Scripture as an “outpouring” (see Acts 2:17; Isa 32:15; Joel 2:28; Prov 1:23). This is better reflected by performing baptism by pouring or sprinkling.[[164]](#footnote-164) Nevertheless, the gift of the Spirit is also compared with the baptism of John (Matt 3:11), which was done by immersion.

We must also consider in our discussion the Greek term βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*), i.е., “baptism,” and its related forms.[[165]](#footnote-165) In classical Greek, this word meant “immersion,” but with some exceptions. First, in Luke 11:38 the word βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) is used in the sense of washing hands, which is short of total body immersion.[[166]](#footnote-166) In addition, in Mark 7:4 we read, “…and {when they come} from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots).” Shedd claims that the Jews washed their hands by pouring water on them, and that they cleansed vessels by pouring or sprinkling.[[167]](#footnote-167)

Additionally, in the Apocryphal books of the Septuagint, we encounter the term βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) again, namely in *Judith,* 12.7 and *Sircah*, 31[34].25. Hodge suggests that in the latter passage, immersion is not in view since the text is dealing with cleansing from ceremonial defilement, which, according to Numbers 19:13, is accomplished by sprinkling.[[168]](#footnote-168) Shedd advances a similar position that in *Judith*, 12.7, immersion is again not in view, since Judith would not take a bath outside in a spring near the camp – she would have just washed up.[[169]](#footnote-169) We will delay a further discussion on the word βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) until the section on immersion (see below).

The final argument in favor of sprinkling or pouring is found in early Christian art dating from the second century. Baptism is depicted as being performed by pouring.[[170]](#footnote-170) Typically, the candidate is standing naked in water which may suggest immersion, yet sometimes the water is not deep and is being poured on the head. On the other hand, all the early Church Fathers who wrote about the topic speak of immersion.[[171]](#footnote-171) If we encounter a discrepancy between specific teaching on baptism by the Church Fathers and a representation of it in art, we give preference to the former.

**b. Immersion**

Immersion is supported by the symbolism of the baptismal event. According to Scripture, it represents cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16) and burial/resurrection with Christ (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-13). Both symbols are best depicted by complete immersion.

Furthermore, the Bible contains several clear examples of baptism by immersion. When John baptized Jesus, the latter “came up out of the water” (Mk 1:10). In Acts 8, when the Ethiopian eunuch turned to the Lord he and Phillip went down into the water, and Phillip baptized him (Acts 8:36). Additionally, in John 3:23 we read that John “was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there,” which implies immersion.

We return to our discussion of the key term βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*), which is the conventional designation for baptism in water. In classical Greek, it denotes immersion.[[172]](#footnote-172). In the Old Testament, we witness the same: “(Naaman) he went down and dipped {himself} (βαπτίξω) seven times in the Jordan” (2 Kin 5:14). Also significant is how βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) is used metaphorically. In 1 Corinthians 10:2, where the children of Israel “were baptized (βαπτίξω) into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” although neither the waters of the sea, nor the cloud touched them, we can nonetheless picture immersion here. Moreover, in Mark 10:38-39 Jesus described His sufferings under the figure of baptism. In light of the cruel sufferings He endured, the picture of “immersion” fits better than either “pouring” or “sprinkling.” Finally, in Galatians 3:27 the verb βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) stands in parallel with “clothed,” that is, a complete “immersion” in clothing.

We recall that our discussion of sprinkling and pouring revealed that the verb βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) and its related forms can refer to those practices as well. Nevertheless, even though βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) can at times indicate sprinkling or pouring, the existence of other terms carrying those connotations makes the claim unlikely that βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) was used regularly for sprinkling or pouring.

Therefore, without a specific mention in the text that it means otherwise, it is advisable to ascribe to βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) and its related forms the sense of immersion. So then, when in the New Testament the word βαπτίξω (*baptidzo*) applies to water baptism, it is referring to immersion.[[173]](#footnote-173)

Moreover, from a historical perspective Brown mentions that from the seventh century, we observe a decrease in the size of baptisteries, which corresponds to an alteration in how congregations performed baptism – no longer by immersion, but by sprinkling or pouring.[[174]](#footnote-174) It is also interesting that the Early Church’s method of immersion differed from ours. The candidate knelt in the water and bowed face first into the water.[[175]](#footnote-175)

**2. In Which Name to Baptize?**

In which name should we baptize: in the name of Jesus, or in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? In the Scriptures, one can find support for both variants. For example, in Matthew 28:19 Jesus commissioned His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” In the book of Acts, though, the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus (see Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). How can this discrepancy be resolved?

In favor of the Trinitarian formula, we note that Matthew 28:19 is a concrete injunction from the Lord Himself. On the other hand, in Acts we have not a specific teaching, but examples from church practice.

The second century non-canonical book, *Didache*, echoes Jesus’ injunction to use the Trinitarian formula: “Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water” (*Didache,* 7). The Church Fathers did the same. In fact, they consider baptisms performed without the Trinitarian formula invalid. Curiously, though, later in the *Didache* baptism in done “in the name of the Lord” (chp. 9). Harrison makes this comment, “There is no more need to see contradiction between Matt 28:19 and the language of Acts than to see it between the two passages in the *Didache.*”[[176]](#footnote-176)

Nonetheless, if baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is more appropriate, then why did the apostles in Acts baptize in Jesus’ name? It may be helpful to observe that the phrase “in the name of Jesus” was also employed in prayer and in performing miracles (including exorcisms). In these cases, the expression “in the name of Jesus” refers to His authority. Therefore, baptism in Jesus’ name may be understood not as a baptismal formula, but as indicating the authority by which baptism is performed.[[177]](#footnote-177)

Moreover, this phrase may point to the object of baptismal candidate’s faith. In other words, Jesus is the one the baptismal candidate is relying on for salvation. For example, in Acts 22:16 Ananias said to Saul, “Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, *calling on His name*.” It is also possible that baptism “in Jesus’ name” simply distinguishes Christian baptism from non-Christian ones.[[178]](#footnote-178)

Furthermore, this phrase may point to the One to whom the baptismal candidates are devoting their lives.[[179]](#footnote-179) Paul commented in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13: “Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” In other words, to be baptized in Paul’s name is to be “of Paul,” and to be baptized in Jesus’ name is to be “of Jesus.” Therefore, baptism “in the name of Jesus” could refer to one’s commitment to be His disciple.

We conclude that according to the command of the Lord Jesus Himself, the proper method for baptism is to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Several plausible alternative explanations exist for the other variant, as noted above.

We can also mention an event related to this question. In the contemporary church, a movement called “Jesus only” has arisen that baptizes exclusively in the name of Jesus. This group denies the existence of the Trinity and teaches that Jesus is the only Person of the Godhead. Yet, the clear biblical teaching on the Trinity overturns this false teaching.

**3. How Many Times to Baptize?**

Also entering the discussion on baptism is the issue of how many immersions should be performed: one or three? Some interpret Matthew 28:19, “…baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” to say that three immersions are prescribed, one for each Person of the Trinity. This is the Eastern Orthodox view and practice. John of Damascus defended this approach: “For by the three immersions, baptism signifies the three days of our Lord’s entombment.”[[180]](#footnote-180) Catholics also practice this, but with three sprinkles rather then with three immersions.[[181]](#footnote-181)

Others prescribe a threefold immersion, such as Tertullian (*The Chaplet*, 3), Basil the Great (*On the Holy Spirit,* 27.66, 67), Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom. In fact, the Second Ecumenical Council speaks critically of a certain sect, “Eunomians, who are baptized with only one immersion.”[[182]](#footnote-182)

On the other hand, we have in Scripture no example of such a practice. Again, baptism represents cleansing (Acts 22:16) and burial/resurrection (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:11-13). If an individual has already bathed, that person is clean and need not dip again. If an individual has already died, there is no reason to rebury that person. Baptism is not done primarily to acknowledge the Trinity or to recall the three days that Jesus spent in the tomb. Therefore, a single immersion is adequate.

**4. Who Can Perform Baptism?**

The next question for our consideration is who can perform baptisms? Some Christian denominations, namely Catholics and Orthodox, hold the view that only clergy in the apostolic succession have this right.[[183]](#footnote-183) Other confessions teach that apostolic succession is not needed, yet the baptizer must nonetheless be an ordained minister.[[184]](#footnote-184) However, the above mentioned groups will allow for the so-called “laity” to baptize in an emergency.[[185]](#footnote-185)

We must consider, though, that when Jesus commissioned His disciples to perform water baptism (Matt 28:19), this did not imply that they alone had the right to do so. Those who feel that the Great Commission limits the right to baptize will, at the same time, not hesitate to acknowledge that other elements of the Great Commission, i.e., to evangelize and make disciples, are applicable to all Christians.

The Bible gives no specific instructions on the question of qualifications to baptize. It is interesting to note that Paul, who had the highest authority in the Church as an apostle, delegated that ministry to others (1 Cor 1:14). Most likely, the teaching among Protestants that baptism requires an ordained minster is an unconscious carryover from the sacramental understanding of baptism practiced earlier in church history.

In summary, we claim that theoretically any believer can perform water baptism. Nevertheless, for the sake of order, it is reasonable to assign that task to church leaders. In any case, since the Bible does not prescribe baptism by clergy alone, one cannot insist on that order.

**5. The Question of Re-Baptism**

Christians also ponder the question of re-baptism. The apostles encountered that dilemma as well. We recall the instance in Ephesus where Paul met some disciples of John the Baptist. He determined that John’s baptism was insufficient and re-baptized these individuals in Christian baptism (Acts 19:5).

During the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptist bravely advanced the view that believers who were baptized as infants should be re-baptized as believers. Wright comments on the consequences of their stand: “For this Anabaptists suffered, being branded frequently as ‘Donatists’ and subjected to the sanctions of the anti-Donatist legislation of the early Christian Roman emperors.”[[186]](#footnote-186)

Protestants who do not recognize infant baptism teach that persons should receive water baptism after a conscious decision to follow Christ, even if they received baptism as infants. Since the Bible does not sanction infant baptism, this baptism is considered invalid.

At the same time, those who baptize only believers usually allow only one such event. Nonetheless, not all share this view. If persons considered themselves believers at the time of their initial baptism, but really were not and later truly come to Christ, should they be re-baptized? The Baptist theologian Strong feels that re-baptism in such cases is not necessary.[[187]](#footnote-187) Others may allow or ever require it. The present author supports the latter view.

**6. Additions to the Baptismal Ceremony**

The final topic for our investigation concerning proper methodology in baptism is the presence of certain additions to the baptismal ceremony that have accrued over the centuries. How appropriate are they?

Before the third century, the baptismal rite had already been embellished, as described in the work *Apostolic Constitutions*. The candidates would go out to a place with running water, remove all clothing, and receive an anointing, the “oil of exorcism,” for cleansing from demons. Before the ceremony, the bishop sanctified the water and the oil. When the catechumens received the anointing, they renounced the devil. Then, they were immersed three times. On consecutive immersion, they confessed their faith in the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit respectively. The bishop anointed them again, this time with the “oil of blessing.” He then laid hands on the catechumens to impart the Holy Spirit to them. This was followed by another anointing, a sealing, and a “kiss of peace.” The congregation then received the newly baptized and they shared communion together with a partaking of milk and honey.

Tertullian mentioned still another custom: “From that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week” (*The Chaplet*, 3), and newly baptized clothe themselves in white garments, which were donned after the ordinance.[[188]](#footnote-188) In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem introduced into our discussion still other additions. When the catechumens renounce Satan, they stand with their face to the West (and other authors add that they spit three times[[189]](#footnote-189)), but when then confess their faith, they face to the East.[[190]](#footnote-190)

Are such adaptations appropriate for the baptismal ceremony today? Even though these customs may contain meaningful symbolism, nonetheless these additions give the ceremony pagan overtones. If these elements were necessary for baptism to be meaningful, then why did the apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, not introduce these practices themselves? It seems that such additions more distract from the main thrust of the event than enrich it.

We prefer the simple biblical model – a single immersion of candidates in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit upon their confession of personal faith in Christ.

### E. Application of Baptism

At the close of our discussion about baptism, it is important to make a statement about its application to the Christian life. Until now, we have spoken of baptism as a symbol of cleansing from sin and burial/resurrection with Christ. In this sense, the ordinance of baptism serves as a source of comfort and strength. Yet, this ordinance promotes ethical living as well. Baptism is a summons to dedicate oneself to the Lord. We must take into consideration several key passages that urge the baptized to conduct a life consistent with the gospel.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:1-4).

In his epistle to the Colossians, Paul again raises the topic of baptism and makes the point that the deliverance from the power of sin provided through Christ’s sacrifice and represented by baptism should lead to life-transformation:

…and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead (Col 2:11-12).

Furthermore, we heed Paul’s instruction to his co-worker Titus. After Paul encourages good deeds and turning from evil (3:1-2), he describes the former manner of life of believers (3:3), and then appeals to water baptism as a stimulus to sanctification:

But when the kindness of God our Savior and {His} love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to {the} hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds (Tit 3:4-8).

Finally, Paul gives the example of the nation of Israel, who, after experiencing “baptism into Moses,” neglected their covenant relationship with Yahweh and turned away from Him:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.… Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us…» (1 Cor 10:1-6).

Let us hold to a true understanding of water baptism and apply its call to holiness and dedication to the Lord to the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose name we are baptized.

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157. Булатова О. А. Водное крещение в истории христианской церкви // Студенческая работа, Московский Теологический Институт. – Москва, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. For example, see *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 28.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Murray, p. 20-21; Hodge, v. 3, p. 526. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Murray, p. 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Shedd, p. 819-820. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Murray, p. 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Hodge, v. 3, p. 526. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Murray p. 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. See Beazley, p. 65; Averbeck, p. 266-272; Chafer L. S. Systematic theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993. – V. 7. – P. 32-38; Hodge C. Systematic theology. – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. – V. 3. – P. 528-533; Shedd, p. 820; Rayburn R. S. Baptism, Modes of // Elwell W. A. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. – P. 134; Strong, p. 934. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Shedd, p. 820. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Hodge, v. 3, p. 528-529. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Shedd, p. 820-821. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Stander, Louw, p. 172ff; Brown H. F., p. 91-93; Rayburn R. S. Baptism, Modes of // Elwell W. A. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001. – P. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. The following witnesses describe baptism as immersion: *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Pastor of Hermas*, Irenaeus, Serapion of Antioch, Cyprian, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, and others. The Eastern Church continues to practice immersion. Even Luther, who did not require immersion, saw value in it. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Strong, p. 934. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Brown H. F., p. 75-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Argyle, p. 194-195. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Harrison E. F. Did Christ command world evangelism? // Christianity Today. – November 23, 1973. P. 9. Taken from Plaster D. R. Baptism by triune immersion // Grace Theological Journal. 1985. 6. P. 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Pickering so taught (Pickering, p. 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. So teach: Hultgren, p. 9; Dockery D. S. Baptism in the New Testament // Southwestern Journal of Theology. 2001. 43. p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. So teach: Plaster, p. 385; Flemington, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 4.9. Cyril of Jerusalem also so taught. See *The Catechetical Lectures*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Catechism of the Catholic Church, № 1239. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. *The Canons of the Second Ecumenical Council, Constantinople (381)*, 1, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Catholics also allow deacons to baptize (Catechism of the Catholic Church, № 1256). [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Mueller, p. 499. Also see *Westminster Confession of Faith,* 28.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Mueller, p. 499. Also see *Westminster Confession of Faith,* 28.2; Pieper, v. 3, p. 279; Kolb, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Wright D. F., p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Strong, p. 950. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. George T. Galatians // Dockery D. The new American commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994. – P. 787. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church, p. 856; George T., p. 280-281. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Argyle, p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)