

## What does “baptism” mean? A Series on the Holy Spirit - Baptism verses Filling: Part 1

What is the meaning and significance of baptism to the Believer? The concept is important, because the practice arises from the Jesus’ command to the apostles:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20).

Translated in English as “baptize,” the Greek term “baptizō” means “to immerse” in water. John the Baptist baptized in the River Jordan (Matt 3:6; Mark 1:5; John 1:31-33). And on two occasions, baptism took place, because there was the presence of water (John 3:23; Acts 8:36).

“Baptizō” is used in the context of full immersion. This can be seen in Jesus’ baptism in which He “came up from the water (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10) and as well the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38-39). During the first century, the Greek term “baptizō” was used to describe the sinking of a ship that was fully immersed in water.

When John the Baptist initiated water baptism, the practice did not appear to the Jews as a foreign concept. Established by Mosaic legislation, ritual washings and cleansing was required for ceremonial purity (Lev 8:6; Num 8:7; 19:9). Numerous archeological remains of ancient ritual cleansing pools (mikvaot) can be found in Israel testifying to the widespread Jewish practice of cleansing by self immersion.

Symbolically similar to cleansing of the Old Testament, John the Baptist baptized for repentance (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:3; Acts 19:4). Whereas cleansing of the Old Testament placed an emphasis on physical purity, John the Baptist’s baptism placed an emphasis on spiritual purity. From this perspective, John’s baptism was righteous and sought by Jesus (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22).

John’s baptisms were intended to proclaim the coming of Jesus the Messiah (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:25-26). With Jesus’ ministry and resurrection, baptisms by John the Baptist fulfilled their purpose and were replaced by baptisms in Christ (Acts 19:1-5).

After the crucifixion, baptism was, in some cases, seen as symbolic of purification and cleansing from sins (Acts 22:16; Tit 3:5). However, baptism represented much more than the removal of sin.

There is a symbolic union with Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:16) in His death, burial and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12). “Baptizing in the name of Jesus Christ” indicated that the Believer was bound to or a property of Jesus Christ. In one sense water immersion signified the death of Christ, and emersion represented His resurrection; in essence, the atonement of Jesus Christ washed away the Believer’s sins.

The apostle Paul makes clear that baptism reflects the commitment of Believers to Jesus Christ. A Believer’s baptism marked the end of a life without Christ to a new life in Christ.

In relation to the gospel, Jesus links baptism to the work of evangelism and teaching when He instructs His disciples of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).

The above discussion views baptism symbolically as a public indication of a person who has already made the decision to believe and trust in Jesus Christ; baptism occurs sometime after a person has accepted the gospel. Baptizing into the name of Jesus Christ is a public identification with Jesus Christ. However, some interpreters view baptism differently.

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Some interpreters understand baptism as the means by which God confers grace (John 3:5; Acts 2:38-39), and in their view, baptism is necessary for salvation. In essence baptism is seen as the act that causes regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

This sequence of baptism occurring at the time of conversion (or the act that causes it) is difficult to reconcile with the biblical text. The Bible indicates that conversion occurs first and then followed by baptism (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:44-48; 1 Cor 1:17). Other contradictions exist where the Bible indicates that faith alone saves (Rom 4:2-3).

Some interpreters view baptism as a sign and seal of the New Covenant. For God's part, because of what Jesus did on the cross, God will forgive and regenerate; for all who receive baptism (adults and infants), the benefits of God's grace will be available for all who remain faithful to the vows made on their behalf at baptism (Acts 2:39; 16:15, 33; 1 Cor 1:16). Baptism is required under the New Covenant and takes the place of the Old Testament requirement of circumcision (Col 2:11-12). Just as infants were circumcised under the Mosaic Covenant (Gen 17:10-13), infants are to be baptized under the New Covenant.

Among the many objections to this view is the fundamental difference between circumcision and baptism. Circumcision was the physical and external means of entrance into the covenant community regardless of one's faith (Gen 17:10-13, 23; Josh 5:1-5). In contrast, baptism is the external sign of one's faith, and the only community mentioned in the New Testament is the church whose membership does not require baptism.

In examples of household baptisms, the gospel was presented and heard by all before baptism took place (Acts 16:14-15; 32-34). Stephanas and his family, who Paul baptized (1 Cor 1:16), were noted for their faith (1 Cor 16:15). While baptism was not mentioned, there are other instances where entire households came to faith (John 4:53; Acts 18:8).

While the predominant use of the term baptism in the New Testament is in regards to new Believers, the Bible also speaks of “baptism... with fire” (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16), “baptism into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:2), and “baptism for the dead” (1 Cor 15:2). [Note: baptism in the Holy Spirit will be addressed in the next article of this series: What does it mean “baptism in / with the Holy Spirit?”.]

“Baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16) was a phrase used twice by John the Baptist, and it is difficult to understand what John meant.

Some believe that the presence of only one article (i.e. the) governing the two nouns (i.e. Holy Spirit and fire) indicates that only one baptism is in view.

However, translators inserted the definitive article for the English translation; in the Greek text, there is no definitive article preceding the noun “Holy Spirit,” so the Granville Sharp rule does not apply. It is still an open question whether John is speaking of one or two different baptisms.

Those who hold to the view that John the Baptist is speaking of one baptism, see it as a prophetic utterance of the tongues of fires that appeared on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

Some believe that John's prophecy of “baptism... with fire” is a distinctly different from “baptism with the Holy Spirit.” These commentators note that John's prophetic statement took place when Jewish religious authorities were present (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7) and in the context of judgment where fire is mentioned several times in association with punishing the unrepentant (Matt 3:10, 12; Luke 3:9, 17). Taking the Greek term “baptizō” literally, the passage makes natural sense from this perspective.

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“Baptism into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:2) is an expression used by Paul to refer to the nation of Israel that took part in the Exodus (1 Cor 10:1: “our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea”).

The nation of Israel experiences a symbolic baptismal immersion with God’s choice of Moses, God and His shekinah glory and physical redemption from Egypt.

The Exodus and the manner of Israel’s emancipation marks the change to a new life: from slavery in a foreign land to freedom in the Promised Land.

With this reference to the Old Testament, Paul establishes a historical and unique experience that defines the nation of Israel. It was a figure of speech and not a reference to any form or exercise of the practice of baptism; but, in many ways sharing the symbolism of baptism.

“Baptism for the dead” is mentioned only once in the New Testament (1 Cor 15:29). There is scant biblical and extrabiblical information about this or its background; but, it appears to be a known practice of the Corinthian church during the first century. Several scholars offer hypothesis and speculation, but the practice is difficult to understand without any historical or textual evidence.

In his discourse on the fact of Jesus Christ’s resurrection, Paul mentions “baptism for the dead” as an argument for the reality of the resurrection of the dead that some are denying. In this context, he shows no indication of approving this practice.

Paul’s logic is as follows:

- 1) The historical fact of Jesus Christ’s resurrection and basis of salvation (1 Cor 15:12-19).
- 2) The order of resurrection: first, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:20) and second Believers at Jesus Christ’s return (1 Cor 15:23).
- 3) Lastly, death itself is abolished (1 Cor 15:26).

Paul’s logic is reinforced by alluding to their practice of “baptism for the dead.”

“If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?” (1 Cor 15:29)

There seems little reason to consider this Corinthian practice since its reference is used to make the point of Jesus Christ’s resurrection. Unlike the Believer’s baptism, Paul, nor any of the apostles, do not mention “baptism for the dead” in the context of a command or endorsed as a practice. Furthermore, absent in the biblical text is any support of the notion that a living person can be baptized and affect the salvation of one who is dead.

Jesus speaks of only two church ordinances which refer to His work of atonement. The Lord’s Supper commemorates the sacrificial death of Jesus. Baptism symbolizes Jesus’ death, resurrection and the cleansing of sin for the Believer. Together they serve to remind Believers of Jesus’ supreme act of atonement.

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References:

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