

BAPTISM

IT'S NOT AN OPTION

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What's the big deal about baptism?

Have you ever wondered that? Maybe it seems strange to you that many churches even call themselves "Baptist." We have plenty of other doctrines, so why single out this one?

Good question. Fortunately, part of the answer can be found in history. Starting with the New Testament, whenever a person put his trust in Jesus, he was baptized. As time went on, unfortunately, many Christians started to accept the idea of baptismal regeneration, which is the idea that baptism saves a person. Eventually this led to the practice of pedobaptism, which is the baptizing of babies. It only makes sense. If baptism saves, you want your baby saved, right?

Around the sixteenth century AD there was a group that stood against this unbiblical practice and claimed that baptism was for believers only. They were called Anabaptist (re-baptizers) by their enemies. While the Anabaptists are not necessarily direct predecessors of modern Baptists, they correctly understood that infant baptism was not real baptism. In fact, although they had been baptized as babies, they did not consider themselves re-baptized. If infant baptism was not real baptism, then their "second baptism" was actually their first!

The enemies of the Anabaptists came up with the perfect punishment for these "heretics." Since the Anabaptists were so in love with water, drowning, or a "third baptism," was chosen as the penalty for being re-baptized.

One of the most famous Anabaptist martyrs was Feliz Manz, who was condemned to death in 1527 by the reformer Ulrich Zwingli. Manz was taken to a river in Zurich and placed in a squatting position with his hands tied below his knees. A stick was inserted below his legs and above his arms to hobble him, and he was subsequently thrown into the river. As he drowned, his mother and brother stood by watching and shouting him words of encouragement. The last words of this brave martyr were, "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit."¹

I have heard the estimate that the average life span after re-baptism in the sixteenth century was eighteen months. Would you be baptized if you knew you would be dead within a year and a half?

As for the Baptists (as we know them), baptism has always been a defining belief (surprised?). The first Baptist church was formed in 1609 by John Smyth, who had previously left the Anglican Church. Smith brought his Separatist church to Amsterdam to escape persecution from King James I, who was requiring membership in the Church of England. While there, Smyth came to realize (possibly from Mennonite influence) that baptism was for believers only. As a result, he disbanded his church, baptized himself and some others, then reorganized the church as a congregation of baptized believers.

It is obvious from history that baptism is a matter of great importance. Therefore, we would do well to ask a few questions about the practice. Questions like: "How should it be done?" "What does it mean?" "Why do we do it?" Let's attempt to answer these questions, beginning with the first.

THE METHOD OF BAPTISM

How did folks in the New Testament baptize? We begin to answer this question by looking at the word “baptize” itself. It is taken from the Greek word *baptizo* and means “to immerse” or “submerge.” In other words, in a real baptism, the person gets all wet. I guess that is why when John baptized, he found a place with ample water.

Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. (John 3:23)

If we were to read the Bible without any preconceived notions, most likely we would understand that baptism consisted of immersing a person in water. Sprinkling does not even fit the definition.

You may also notice that baptism took place immediately. Later we will look at the Ethiopian eunuch. After listening to Philip share about Jesus, he asked if he could be baptized. Philip made sure he believed what he was being told about Jesus, they pulled off the side of the road, got out of the chariot, and waded out into the water to hold an impromptu baptismal service.

We will also consider Cornelius, a Roman centurion. After he and his family heard Peter speak about Jesus, they receive the Holy Ghost. This prompted Peter to ask, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47). There was no required class, no catechism, no test to pass. Evidence of their salvation was enough.

So, we see that the method of baptism is twofold: it is done by immersion and it is carried out as soon as possible. However, why is the method so important? It is because of its meaning. A believer is immediately and totally immersed into the body of Christ at his salvation, and baptism is a symbol of that fact.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

Let’s dig a little deeper into the meaning of baptism. If this is new to you, it is possible that you might think that the whole thing is a little strange. What is the purpose of dunking a person in a lake or oversize bathtub for the whole world to see? I guess we should begin with what its purpose is *not*.

Baptism is not for salvation

If baptism was necessary for salvation, would it be reasonable to expect that Paul would have made it a focus of his ministry? However, just the opposite seems to be true.

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the

household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (I Corinthians 1:13-17)

I find it difficult to believe that Paul discounted baptism as unnecessary or unimportant, because of the focus that Jesus and the Apostles put on it. However, he must have understood that his status as an international church planter could have influenced some folks he baptized to wear it as a badge of honor. *I* was baptized by Paul---who baptized *you*? Because salvation was not required for salvation, he felt best to leave that task to others.

Here are some other verses that show how salvation is achieved. Notice how baptism is conspicuously absent.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)

Baptism is identification with Jesus Christ

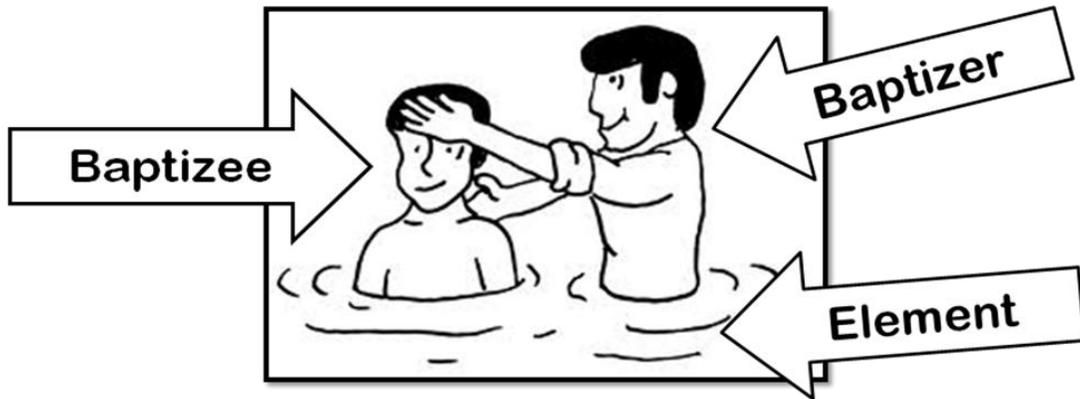
In the New Testament, a person would be baptized when he decided to identify with the Messiah, Jesus Christ. To identify with someone is to publicly show that you believe in him and support him. That, by the way, is exactly what you do every time you don the overpriced regalia of your favorite sports team. You are proud of your team and you want everyone to know it.

Baptism is a picture of the baptism of the Holy Ghost

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

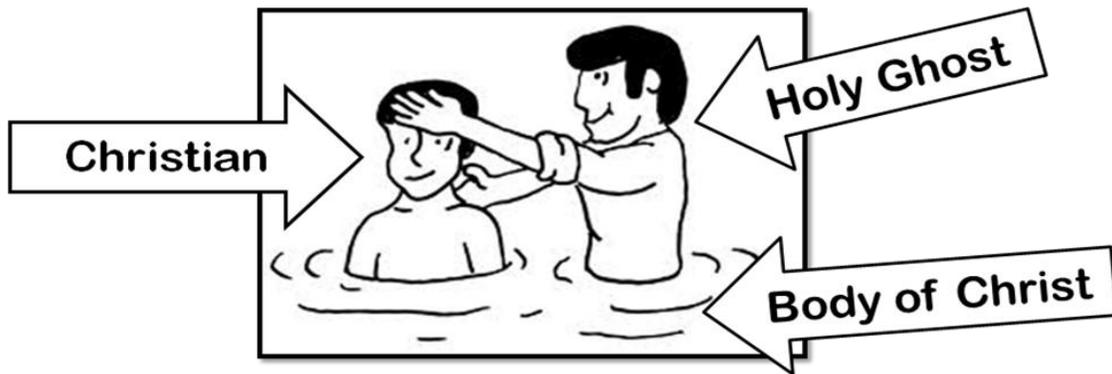
Because we have already seen that water baptism is not a part of salvation, it is obvious that the subject of these verses is not water baptism. It is rather the baptism, or immersion, into the body of Christ, which is done by the Holy Spirit. This, by the way, is the reality to which water baptism points.

To understand how this works, we need to understand all the elements of baptism. Three participants are necessary: the baptizer (who is doing it), the baptizee (the one being baptized), and the element of baptism (what is being used for the baptism).



In water baptism, such as you might observe in a church service, the three participants are usually the pastor (baptizer), the person being baptized (baptizee) and water (element).

The baptism of the Holy Ghost, to which Paul refers in Romans 6:3-4, also possesses all three participants. They are: the Holy Ghost (baptizer), the new believer (baptizee), and the body of Christ (element). In other words, the baptism of the Holy Ghost is the baptism *by* the Holy Spirit *into* the body of Christ. The believer is totally identified with Jesus Christ.



Here are some additional verses about the baptism of the Holy Ghost:

... for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. (Acts 1:5 – the words of Jesus)

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11 – the words of John the Baptist)

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, “John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”
 (Acts 11:15-16 – the words of Peter)

When you are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, you are immersed into complete identification with Him. Let's keep reading what Paul wrote to the Romans.

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. (Romans 6:5-6)

So, why wouldn't you be baptized? Are you ashamed of Jesus Christ? He certainly was not ashamed of you! He might be, though, in the future . . .

For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:38)

Now that we know what baptism is and that it is not a part of salvation, we have to ask another question. Are we commanded to do it?

THE MANDATE TO BAPTIZE

Yes, we are required to baptize and be baptized. In the "Great Commission," Jesus instructed His followers to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

Baptism is part of the process of evangelism. We are to make disciples of all people and follow it up with baptism. Baptism is the logical step that follows salvation. It is a command of God. If you are not willing to follow Him in this simple step, will He be able to trust you with anything else?

THE MODEL OF BAPTISM

As we have seen, the decision to be baptized has, for many people, been life-changing (and in some cases, life-ending). We can also point out at least one case in more recent history. In 1812, Adoniram Judson set out for India to be a Congregational Missionary. During the lengthy voyage, he and his wife, Anne, studied the Bible about baptism and realized they had not been scripturally baptized. When they arrived in India, they were baptized and became Baptists. About the same time, Luther Rice, another American missionary, was having a similar experience aboard a different ship. When Rice and Judson cut their denominational ties, they were left with no financial backing. This prompted Rice returned to the States to try to gain support. From his fund-raising efforts an organization was formed, which was usually called the "Triennial Convention."ⁱⁱ Eventually this led to the establishment of the Southern Baptist Convention, which has a commendable focus on missions.

Why would people like Rice and Judson, not to mention scores of others throughout history, allow the decision to be baptized alter their lives forever? Aside from the fact that baptism is commanded by God, we also have great examples of biblical characters who obeyed

in this area. Let's consider a few of them.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist lived, of course, long before the Baptist denomination was founded. We know him as "John the Baptist," though, because of the hallmark of his ministry: he baptized people.

John's task was to prepare the way for the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In preparation for the kingdom which Jesus was to establish, he commanded his listeners to repent and be baptized.

Although John the Baptist made baptizing people a highlight of his ministry, the practice did not originate with him. There is evidence in ancient religions and Judaism that people and objects were ceremoniously purified by putting them in water. So, the people observing John's ministry understood that these folks were immersing themselves into a new religion.

Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matthew 3:5-6)

When people were baptized by John, the baptism was accompanied by confession of sins. To confess something is to acknowledge or to agree completely with it. These people were acknowledging their sin before God and the world.

Notice how baptism and confession go together. As we have seen, it seems that confession and baptism are almost simultaneous. There is no waiting period.

While we're on the subject of John's baptism, let's focus in on a subject that may seem a little sticky at first. Describing his ministry, John said:

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11)

The tricky phrase is "baptize you with water unto repentance." What does this mean? To help us understand, we have to remember the context. As John was busy baptizing, a group of Scribes and Pharisees showed up on the river bank. These self-righteous religious leaders had no intention of confessing their sins and being baptized, and John knew it. They had no desire for repentance because they figured their righteous deeds made them good enough. John disagreed.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." (Matthew 3:7-9)

He commanded them to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." In other words, "If you want to

be baptized (which I'm sure you don't), let me see some evidence of your repentance! If you don't have repentance, you have no part in this baptism."

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11)

Remember the Anabaptists? They knew that baptism would most likely put their lives in peril. The folks John baptized also knew that they were setting a mark on themselves. But they had repented of their old ways. They were new folks now. As a result, they were willing to be identified with Jesus Christ, even to the death.

This might be a good time to tackle another difficult passage dealing with baptism. This time the setting is the birthday of the church, known more popularly as the Day of Pentecost.

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

At first glance, it seems that Peter is promising that baptism will bring remission of sins. However, this cannot be the case, as we have already seen that baptism is not a requirement for salvation. So Peter must have some other meaning in mind. A few verses later we get to see the response of the people to Peter's message.

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. (Acts 2:41)

Notice the order of events—they received Peter's word, then they were baptized. Although in verse thirty-eight Peter seems to say that baptism will bring remission of sins, is it possible that because repentance and baptism take place in such quick succession that he lumps them together in one statement?

I tend to think that one reason that this is a difficult topic is that we too often have a superficial view of salvation. If I just say a certain prayer in the right way, I'm in. If I assent to the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, I will be saved. If I confess that I am a sinner, I will go to Heaven. However, salvation is much deeper. Those who truly believe will have a heart change. If there is a heart change, there will be a life change. If there is a life change, you will be happy to be publicly identified with Jesus Christ.

With that in mind, allow me give you my summary of what Peter is saying: A clear understanding of who you are and who God is will prompt you to confess your sins and turn from them. Baptism (publicly identifying with Jesus) will follow, and you will not have a problem with it.

Baptism is not optional. Where in the Bible do you see any true convert trying to weasel out of baptism? No one says, "Since baptism is not required for salvation, I know that God

understands if I don't go through with it." To refuse baptism would be like agreeing to marry someone but not letting anyone know. Why not? If you're ashamed of that person, you better not marry them!

Jesus

Not only did John the Baptist believe in baptizing, but so did Jesus. Of course, Jesus needed no repentance, but He still set the example for His followers.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Why did Jesus get baptized? Using His own words, He did it to "fulfill all righteousness." Put another way, everything that God requires should be done. God requires baptism, so Jesus submitted to it.

The eunuch

Another example of baptism in the New Testament is found in the account of the Ethiopian eunuch. This man was a high-ranking official in the queen of Ethiopia's court (she is known as "Candace" or *kandake*, which is a title that refers to the line of queens in Egypt during that time period). This eunuch had travelled to Jerusalem to worship, and on his return trip was sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah's prophecies. He came across Philip, whom by divine appointment "happened" to be in the desert at just the right time. He invited Philip into his chariot, where for the next several miles he was treated to a tailor-made sermon about Jesus. The topic of baptism must have come up in Philip's lecture, because as soon as they passed by some water, the eunuch interrupted him by saying, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). Philip's response: "If you believe with all your heart, you may." Notice what precedes baptism: belief.

Both Philip and the eunuch climbed out of the chariot and "went down into the water" (Acts 8:38). I point this out because Philip did not open his flask and drizzle a pint or two over the eunuch's head. That would not be a baptism. They had to get down *into* the water so the guy could get all wet. All those present (I take it for granted that a man of such a high position would not be traveling alone) would understand that he was immersing himself fully into identification with Jesus Christ. It was not a half-hearted thing. He believed with "all his heart."

Cornelius

The final example that we will consider is Cornelius, an officer in the Roman military.

Although he was a Gentile, he sincerely feared God. Through an interesting set of circumstances, God brought this man and Peter together so Peter could show him the way of salvation. As Peter was preaching to a large crowd made up of Cornelius' friends and family, the Holy Spirit suddenly came on the whole group. Here is Peter's response to this bizarre circumstance:

Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? (Acts 10:47)

While this one-of-a-kind event could allow us to branch off into several directions, the reason I mention it here is to show that baptism did not bring the Holy Spirit to these people. The Holy Spirit was there first, *then* came baptism.

CONCLUSION

I understand that this has been a somewhat lengthy look at baptism, but I feel it is justified because of the importance of the subject. I hope you will be able to agree with me that baptism is not optional for the believer. While baptism is not necessary for salvation, it naturally follows on the heels of saving faith. The topic of water baptism is woven throughout the New Testament as an outward picture of the immersion of the new believer into the body of Christ.

This study is not meant to be merely intellectual (at any level), but practical. If you have placed your trust in Jesus Christ and have not been baptized, why not? Are you ashamed of Him? Are you in such rebellion that you refuse to obey God's command and follow Jesus' example? Are you fearful? Why not overcome whatever obstacle you have and take this first step of obedience?

ⁱ <http://www.christian-history.org/felix-manz-martyrdom.html>

ⁱⁱ http://www.sbhla.org/bio_adoniramjudson.htm