

A Biblical Theology of Baptism

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Foreword

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The topic of baptism has been encountered in most forms of Christian religion since the very origins of the Christian faith. In fact, baptism as an act of cleansing already had roots in the tradition of Judaism long before Jesus and Paul preached it! And who can forget the dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist when Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized, and God's comment about his beloved son when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove! Baptism must be important, the full trinity approved of it, Perhaps one of the greatest prophets of Israel reached it, John the Baptist or John the baptizer. The major Apostles of the New Testament taught it, Matthew, Peter and Paul. It appears in the beginnings of the Gospel story as recounted by Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and presented early in the life of Jesus in the four traditional canonical Gospels. It is expressed in the end of Matthew's and Mark's gospel commission.

The interpretation of this doctrine has been shaped by numerous cultural and sociological opinions ever since the first century CE. However, the doctrine has persisted in church life for 2,000 years! Satan and others have tried to loose it, but it is still with us! Praise God, the Lord, and the Holy Spirit for teaching it!

For instance, early in the life of the Corinthian Church, ca CE 56, a doctrine of baptizing for the dead, 1 Cor 15:58, surfaced which Paul criticized as being without biblical foundation and centered in the Corinthian Greek culture and concern for those who had died in a philosophy that denied any doctrine of resurrection. The Greek rejection of a resurrection was the cultural determinant in this strange doctrine of a baptism for the dead which had no roots in either the Old Testament or New Testament systems. Notice Paul's condemnation of this rejection of the crucifixion and resurrection at 1 Cor 1:18-25 and 1 Cor 15.

As the church spread into the Roman world and became a Christianized religion, concern for the sinful nature of man surfaced, cf. the Augustinian Pelagian controversy, ca CE 350. The net result of this has been the Christianized form of pedobaptism, child baptism, since it was believed that the baby was born tainted by original sin and needed to be baptized for salvation and initial entrance into the church.

For various reasons this pedo-baptism shifted from immersion in water to sprinkling with specialized holy water. This form of sprinkling or pedo-baptism is practiced by many churches in the Roman Catholic and Reformation traditions. The Greek Orthodox tradition practices a form of baptism similar to Roman Catholic sprinkling but adapts this into a *pouring* of holy water over an infant seated in a baptism laver.

A form of Christian baptism by immersion is found in certain African Christo-pagan churches. Repentant members are immersed numerous times on the same occasion to drive out the evil spirits inhabiting the person. The baptism is repeated until the member manifests an emotional emetic reaction to being purged by the water. In some variations of this repeat baptisms are practiced on all the members to maintain a pure membership.

In the early 1500 CE era a movement arose in the context of debates on the role of baptism among Ulrich Zwingli and some reformers who opposed infant or pedo-baptism. Out of this movement the religious group commonly identified as the anabaptists surfaced. The term anabaptism derives from the Greek word for *repeated*, *ἀνά*, and *baptism*. The term was somewhat derogatory since the anabaptist movement argued against pedo-baptism infant baptism in favor of adult baptism. More modern forms of anabaptism are found among the Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and Brethren movements. Baptism by immersion upon the confession of faith and repentance among these fellowships is generally associated with salvation and membership in the church.

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, opens his recent study on Baptism with this observation:

“Some within the Christian confession claim that baptism should be classified as a minor issue. *Such a sentiment is misdirected, for baptism is regularly connected in scripture with belief and salvation.*

Baptism, as this book will demonstrate, is the initiation rite into the Christian church. Those who label it as minor are *imposing their own categories onto the Scriptures instead of listening to the Scriptures*. Timothy George reminds us that those who practiced believer's baptism during the Reformation risked “persecution and martyrdom,” and hence did not view baptism as a minor matter. We are not claiming, of course, that a right understanding of baptism is necessary for salvation. Still, to say that a right understanding of baptism is unnecessary for salvation does not lead logically or biblically to the conclusion that baptism is inconsequential. In saying the above, we do not wish to engage in a polemical debate which ratchets up the temperature to a fever pitch. *Our hope is that this book will defend believer's baptism with a charitable and irenic spirit*. We realize that other evangelical believers disagree with us, but we hope to persuade many that the course we chart fits with the scriptural witness.

*Baptism is important precisely because it is tied to the gospel, to the saving work that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. We do not think baptizing infants is merely a minor mistake, even though we rejoice in the evangelical credentials of many with whom we disagree.”*¹

As indicated above, the discussion on baptism we often encounter is not necessarily a *biblical* theology of the subject, but is one more influenced by ecclesiological history, current philosophical persuasions, and sociological developments.

This study, however, is intended to be an advanced theological *inductive* study of the *biblical texts* and doctrine of Baptism, and the biblical meaning and occasions of the words βαπτισμός, *baptismós* and βαπτίζω, *baptízō* in the New Testament. We will reflect on some scholarly biblical studies as a context for our study.

We will begin by examining in some detail the words *baptism, baptize, baptized, Baptist, baptizer*. They are found at least 95 times in the New Testament (Revised Standard Version).

Of the 95 occurrences in the New Testament, the words are found 50 times in the Gospels. They are found in all four Gospels, in Luke's Acts, everywhere I Paul and Peter.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner; Shawn Wright. *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, 2006. Emphases, IAF.

Brief Bibliography

The Bible Dictionaries cited in this study are a good beginning point for examining the doctrine of baptism in the New Testament and its subsequent practice in the Christian tradition:

Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, et al., *The Yale Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1992

Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, et al., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 1987.

George Arthur Buttrick, Thomas Samuel Kepler, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962.

Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1976.

Spiros Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1993.

In addition to some excellent commentaries which will be listed below the following studies on baptism will be helpful and informative.

G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 1962

Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, Eerdmans, 2009.

Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study*, College Publishing Company, 2000.

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, B & H Academic, 2007.

Meaning of the Word Baptism

As indicated above, this study will provide a critical examination of the *scholarly opinion* of the *theological doctrine of baptism*. We begin with a *brief study of the word family* that surrounds the doctrine of baptism. Following this, we will notice several theological statements made by *leading scholars, bible dictionaries, and theological works* from a variety of religious persuasions. We will then *examine the occurrence of this family of words in the New Testament*. Finally we will draw together conclusions from the biblical statements on baptism and offer a *biblical theology of baptism that has its roots within an exegetical biblical framework*.

Topics discussed in this study of the word *baptism*

1. The Words.
2. Remarks in the Yale Anchor Bible Dictionary.
3. Some general theological discussions
 - a. Alan Richardson, Anglican Dean of York, Professor of Christian Theology
 - b. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology
4. Baptism Texts in the Gospels, Acts, Paul, and Peter
5. Theological Discussion on the Textual and Linguistic Analysis.
 - a. Pre-Christian Practice of Baptism
 - b. The Baptism of John the Baptist
 - c. Christian Baptism
6. Biblical theological discussion on the texts: Acts
7. Biblical theological discussion on the texts: Paul, John, and Peter
8. Summary and conclusion of the study of the general word Baptism

The Words

The following are the Greek words found in the New Testament with their literal English translation/meaning from which the English words *baptism*, etc., are transliterated.

The point to notice here is that the Greek words have been transliterated in our English New Testament *without care being given to the context* of the discussion which ultimately should define the meaning of the Greek word.

The reason for this unusual policy can be traced back to the early King James Version, ca 1611 CE. Several translations were made in the context of religious “wars” in England; Roman Catholic, Church of England, and Cromwell Protestant interests and influences. The decision was to *not translate* certain terms such as *Bishop* and *Baptism*, but to retain some “moderate” church interests and powers.

βαπτίζω, *baptizō* – verb, to baptize, *dip, immerse, dip oneself* (middle voice), *wash, plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm*.

βαπτισμός, *baptismós* – noun, baptism, *dip, wash*.

βάπτισμα, *báptisma* – noun, baptism

βαπτιστής, *baptistḗs*, noun baptizer

βάπτω, *báptō* – verb, to dip, dip into, cover with.

The Yale Anchor Bible Dictionary

Below, is an extract from the *Yale Anchor Bible Dictionary* on Baptism.

The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* defines baptism as “a rite of incorporation employing water as a symbol of religious purification.”

In a discussion of the Greek words *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* makes the following observations, vol. 1, pp. 583ff.

“Greek Terminology. The Gk verb for "baptize, " baptizein, is formed from baptein, "dip, " and means "dip frequently or intensively, plunge, immerse."

By Plato's time and onwards it is often used in a figurative sense (e.g., in the passive, "soaked" in wine, Plato 176 B).

It appears 4 times in the LXX: 4 Kingdoms 5:14 (Naaman in the Jordan), Jdt 12:7 (purification), Sir 34:30—in English 34:25 (purification after touching a corpse), Isa 21:4 (figuratively of lawlessness).

The noun *báptisma* is only used in Christian literature, where it refers to the baptism of John or to Christian baptism.

The word *baptismós* is used in a wider sense for dipping, washing (of dishes Mark 7:4), of ritual washings (Heb 9:10; John's baptism, Joseph. Ant. 18.117; Christian baptism, Col 2:12 [variant]).

A synonymous noun is *loutron* "bath" used of both ordinary and ceremonial baths, but in the NT only with reference to baptism.

The corresponding verb *louein* "wash, bathe" is encountered in its everyday use in, e.g., 2 Pet 2:22 and John 13:10. It refers to ceremonial baths in Lev 15:11 and to Christian baptism (probably) in the compound form *apolouein* in 1 Cor 6:11.

Rites of immersion were not uncommon in the world in which early Christianity developed.

One type of symbolism with which they were frequently connected was that of purification: from sin, from destruction, from the profane sphere before entering a holy area, from something under a taboo, etc. See, e.g., Lev 16:4, 24 (the high priest before and after the rites of atonement); Leviticus 15 (on menstruating women); 1 QS 3:5–9 (cleansing from sins); Sib. Or. 4.165 (a baptism of repentance); Joseph. Ant. 18.117 (on John's baptism); Joseph. Life. 11 (on Bannus' ablutions for purity's sake); Apul., Met. 11.23 (purification at the initiation into the Isis mysteries); b. Yebam. 47 ab (on proselyte baptism).

Such cleansings can take place when one stands on the verge of a new state in life or is entering into a new community or upon a new phase of life, etc. (Emphasis, IAF).

Thus they can function as rites of initiation or as rites of passage. Depending on the way in which one regards the situation being left behind and the one being entered, such rites can be connected with ideas of a new birth, of a new life, or of salvation as contrasted to nothingness, chaos, death, or destruction.

As already intimated, many religions in antiquity practiced different washings and baths.

This holds true for the mysteries of Eleusis, of Mithras, and of Isis. The OT prescribed several ablutions to be performed, rules which were observed by Jews also in NT times (John 2:6).

The Qumran community laid a particular stress on them, and Bannus (Joseph. Life. 10) and John the Baptist were not alone in practicing baptisms outside of mainstream Judaism.

Other baptismal movements also appeared in the Transjordanian/Syrian area.

Sometime during the 1st century c.e. proselyte baptism was introduced in Judaism

When baptism received a central place in Mandeism, the rite as such was certainly no novelty, regardless of whether it should be regarded as pre-Christian or not.

One should beware of assigning the same or even similar meanings to these rites. As rites they are open to several interpretations; in each case it is to be expected that the meaning of the rite is provided by the ritual context or otherwise through instruction or tradition.”

General Theological Discussion – *Baptism as a Sacrament*

The majority of mainline, traditional, churches hold to some form of *baptismal tradition*. *In most cases, baptism is seen as a means of transition from a past life into a new life style and relationship with Christ and the church.*

In this sense, baptism has traditionally been seen as *one of the two main sacraments* of the church, *the other being the Eucharist, Communion, or Lord's Supper.*

The term *sacrament* is a technical term [*sacrament* derives from the Latin term *sacramentum* which meant an *oath of allegiance to someone*] that infers a relationship with, or commitment to, Christ and the church. *Baptism is the*

sacramental initiation into the church and relationship with Christ, and the Eucharist [Lord's Supper] is the continued intimate relationship or communion with both.

Alan Richardson², ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, SCM Press, under the section *Initiation* Richardson makes the following observations.

“From apostolic times the initiation of new members into the Church has been by baptism (cf. Acts 2:38, 41)... Theologically baptism signifies what God has done for our salvation through Christ...and also what God does for men individually and corporately through the mediating work of Christ. Baptism, like the other dominical sacrament, the Lord's Supper, is a proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection...The going down into the water symbolizes a burial and the coming up from the waters a resurrection... As we are born into a natural family on earth, so at baptism we are reborn ('regenerated') into the family of our heavenly father...”

Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, 1960, 1983, under “*Baptism and Believers:*” “Baptism: In essence the action of baptism is an extremely simple one, though pregnant with meaning. It consists in a going in or under the baptismal water in the name of Christ (Acts 19:5) or more commonly the Trinity (Matt 28:19). Immersion was fairly certainly the original practice and continued in general use up to the Middle Ages.”

Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Baptism*. “Theologically, the insistence upon believers' baptism in all cases seems better calculated to serve the true significance and benefit of baptism and to avoid the errors which so easily threaten it. Only when there is personal confession before baptism can it be seen that personal repentance and faith are necessary to the salvation through Christ, and that these do not come magically but through hearing the word of God. With believers' baptism the ordinance achieves its significance as the mark of a step from darkness and death to light and life. The recipient is thus confirmed in the decision he has taken, brought into the company of the regenerate, which is the true church..., and encouraged to walk in the new life which he has begun.”

² Alan Richardson, Dean of York, Church of England, Professor of Christian Theology, University of Nottingham, England

General Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Baptism

Pre-Christian Practice of Baptism

We have already noticed above that several religious groups outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition held to some form of baptism or immersion as a form of ceremonial cleansing or washing in the case of certain taboos such as touching a corpse, or the cleansing from some "sin" or ceremonial misdeed, etc. In some cases (Isis) baptism by immersion was part of the process or ceremony of initiation into the group.

Baptismal cleansing was also practiced among the Jews as a means of ceremonial cleansing prior to John the Baptist and the Christian movement. Not only were people cleansed from ceremonial uncleanness, but utensils used in the home or religious functions were also cleansed by immersion. *Mikvah's* (spelled variously) were a common part of prayer places and synagogues before the time of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. (A *mikvah* is a large "pool" or cistern in which a person could be immersed for this ceremonial cleansing. Rules relating to the type of water and ceremony were established in early Judaism. *Mikvah's* have been discovered in many archaeological digs of Jewish communities and synagogues.)

From the Dead Sea Scrolls we have learned that the community at Qumran (and other Dead Sea religious communities) practiced baptism as a form of ceremonial cleansing. In this community baptism was not a once for lifetime experience as in Christian baptism, but one repeated as often as the necessity demanded for ceremonial holiness.

It is not surprising that John the Baptist came preaching a baptism for the forgiveness of sins that was characterized by repentance.

First, we learn from Luke 7:29, 30 (but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him) that John's baptism was not his idea, but that of God, for as we notice, Luke tells us that the Pharisees rejected the purpose of God by not being baptized. John (Jn 1:33) records that John the Baptist understood that he was sent by God to baptize with water.

Second, some scholars suggest, with reasonable grounds, that John may have been raised by one of the Jewish communities in the wilderness (such as the one at Qumran). If so, he must have been familiar with ceremonial baptisms such as those carried out by the Qumran community.

Third, from at least the time of John the Baptist, ceremonial cleansings in *Mikvahs* was already a practice fairly common among the Jews. That the crowds flocked out to hear John and to be baptized by him indicates that they were not surprised by John's insistence that they be baptized demonstrating repentance, and that this baptism was for the forgiveness of sins.

The point we are making here is *that baptism was not a new novelty invented by the Christian community.*

The Baptism of John the Baptist

When John came preaching the urgent and long anticipated message that the kingdom of God was at hand, and demanded repentance and baptism from the Jews, his message had within it certain eschatological (end time) implications. The Jews had long anticipated the coming of a Messiah who would judge the nations and restore God's kingdom to Israel. John came as the forerunner to the Messiah (Matt 3:1-3; Mk 1:1-4, Lk 3:2-9; Jn 1:19-23). His message of repentance and baptism held within it both the promise of cleansing and renewal, and the imminent arrival of the Messianic kingdom.

Mark explains in the clearest terms the nature of John's baptism.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Mk 1:4,5)

We need to understand the nature of the forgiveness offered under John's baptism. Forgiveness of sins was not something new, for such was available through the Mosaic annual sacrificial offering for sin and day of atonement. Repentance and confession of sins was required under the Mosaic system, but the sacrifices had to be repeated every year. The forgiveness of sins offered through John's baptism was part of this Mosaic system

with the new ingredient of baptism as a sign of true repentance. The initiative for this repentance was the imminence of the Messianic kingdom to be inaugurated by Jesus.

Such was the power of John's message that many (all Judea) went out to hear him preach and to be baptized. The exception, however, were the Scribes and Pharisees whose traditional piety was superficial (Jesus calls them hypocrites) and who desiring to make a show of their "righteousness" also came out to hear John, only to hear a scathing rebuke regarding the nature of their false repentance.

The core, or dynamic of John's message was repentance in view of the imminence of the Messianic kingdom. Its purpose was to prepare the Nation of Israel for the coming of the Messiah and the inauguration of his kingdom. John the Baptist clearly claims that his purpose in baptizing was to reveal the Messiah to Israel (Jn 1:31). John's baptism, characterized as it was by repentance, was an indication that the recipient was prepared for the breaking in of God's eschatological kingdom. Baptism was the visible expression of one's faith and repentance, and the goal of that baptism was the forgiveness of sins and preparation for the imminent kingdom of God and the Messiah.

The key points we should note are:

- 1) The baptism of John was accompanied by repentance.
- 2) It offered forgiveness of sins under the Mosaic system.
- 3) It was a forerunner to the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom.
- 4) It operated under the Mosaic system of animal sacrifices which had to be renewed every year.

Years later, Acts 19:3-5, Paul encountered some disciples who had been baptized under John's baptism. He encouraged them to be *baptized in the name of Jesus*, not the name of John: "v3. *And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." v4. And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." v5. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."*

Once Jesus' kingdom had been established, John's baptism was no longer valid.

Jesus' own personal baptism falls under the category of John the Baptist's baptism. Three of the Gospels record Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:12, 13; and Luke 3:21, 22) and the fourth, John, alludes to it (John 1:29-34).

Matthew, in view of his Jewish audience, provides the more detailed explanation of Jesus' baptism. It is Matthew that includes the interesting dialogue between Jesus and John regarding the necessity for Jesus being baptized. John wanted to resist Jesus' baptism, claiming that he needed to be baptized by Jesus rather than Jesus being baptized by John. Jesus responds that his baptism was necessary "to fulfil all righteousness". What Jesus meant by this was that in order to keep in a right relationship with God (righteousness in the Jewish context implied a right relationship with God by doing his will) he needed to be baptized. He had no reason to repent and no sins that needed forgiveness, yet he still needed to keep the will of God in order to be righteous and in a right relationship with his Father. This adds to the importance of John's baptism, since Jesus implies that John's baptism related to doing the will of the Father! (See also Lk 2:20, 30.)

When Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, and God acknowledged Jesus as "*my beloved son in whom he was well pleased.*" This seemingly passing statement actually gave the divine approval of Jesus' baptism.

In John's baptism of Jesus we see *a transition from John's ministry of pointing to Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus beginning his ministry as the Messiah.*

In this significant narrative we find John "*passing the torch*" to Jesus with the fascinating words. "*I baptize you with water for 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 with fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" Matt 3:11, 12

Whereas John's baptism was with water for repentance (and forgiveness - Mark 1:4), Jesus' baptism was to be *with the Holy Spirit and fire*. This brief expression, recorded also in Mark and John (albeit not as fully as in Matthew), presents an interesting study.

First we note that the best translation is "with the Holy Spirit and fire", not repeating the "with" as in "with the Holy Spirit and with fire." *The Greek construction ties Holy Spirit and fire together as one thought, not two.*

Second, although the following verses speak of *the winnowing fork and fire as judgment*, this statement *Holy Spirit and fire speaks not only of judgment but also of sanctification and purification as in the Johannine new birth. Fire in the Jewish tradition could represent both judgment (Isa 5:22; Isa 34:8-10; Isa 66:15, 16, 24) and purification (Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2). Notice the statement in Zech 13:8, 9*

*8 In the whole land, says the Lord,
two thirds shall be cut off and perish,
and one third shall be left alive.*

*9 And I will put this third into the fire,
and refine them as one refines silver,
and test them as gold is tested.*

*They will call on my name,
and I will answer them.*

*I will say, 'They are my people';
and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.'*"

Coupled with the reference to the Holy Spirit the statement "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" speaks of the purification by the Holy Spirit in the new age or the Messianic kingdom (see Hagner, in his commentary *Matthew 1-13*,³ and Isa 44:3; Ezek 36:25-27; 39:29; Joel 2:28, *passim*, and the Dead Sea Scroll text 1QS 4:20-21).

Whereas John's baptism pointed to, or announced, the imminence of the Messiah and the Messianic kingdom, Jesus' Christian baptism, the baptism instituted by Jesus, ushers in or inaugurates the Messianic kingdom, and the purification and forgiveness of sin offered in the Messianic kingdom.

The mention here of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the baptism that Jesus indicates the inauguration and institution of the new birth, **John 3:3-5**, and forgiveness, **Acts 2:38**, in the Messianic kingdom.

John 3:3. Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."⁴

Acts 2:37, 38. Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him."⁵

When John records that Jesus baptized disciples (John 3:22), this was under *the baptism instituted by God through John the Baptist*, and like John's baptism functioned under the Mosaic legal system of sacrifices. This should not be confused with the baptism Jesus instituted and commanded (Matt 28:18, 19; Mark 16:15, 16) and the Apostles taught (Acts 2:38, *passim*).

Thus, the baptism Jesus commanded and instituted, and the Apostles taught, we refer to as *Christian baptism*.

³ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, World Biblical Commentary, 1993, p. 52.

⁴ John 3:2-8.

⁵ Acts 2:37-39.

Christian Baptism

In the following discussion we will summarize the Great Commission of Jesus.

In **Matt 28:18-20** and **Mark 16:15, 16**, Jesus *commanded* his Apostles to *go out into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them, and that those who believed and were baptized would be saved.*

Matt 28:18-20. *“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” ⁶*

Mark 16:15, 16. *“And he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. ¹⁶ He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”⁷*

Thus, what Jesus instituted and the Apostolic church carried out, we call *Christian Baptism*.

We have already noted above that John the Baptist had announced *this Christian category of baptism* with the statement that Jesus would *baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire*.

The baptism of Jesus would usher in the Messianic kingdom, the new birth into the kingdom, and the new life in the Spirit.

The *Gospels* do not explain *the act of baptism* in any detail other than in the discussion by John the Baptist mentioned above, and in Jesus' Great commission.

It is to the *Book of Acts* and the *Epistles of Paul and Peter* that we must turn for *details clarification of the nature, purpose, and act of Christian Baptism*.

We should emphasize again, however, that *Christian Baptism was instituted and commanded by Jesus and carried out by the Apostolic church*.

⁶ Mat 28:18–20.

⁷ Mark 15:15, 16.

Texts of Baptism in Paul, John, and Peter

Baptism in Paul

A unique feature of Paul's use of the concept of baptism, and his theology of baptism is that *in his epistles he is writing to Christians who have already been baptized!*

Unlike Acts where *Luke is recording the Apostolic preaching to Jewish and Gentile unbelievers, Paul is writing to believers, members of the church, those who have already been baptized!* With that in mind Paul had no need to defend his teaching on baptism. His need for the churches for whom he wrote was to *explain the meaning and consequences of baptism.*

Baptism in Paul's use and theology is the means of *reminding Christians of what happened to them when they were baptized, baptism introduced a radical change in their lives, they had experienced a death and resurrection, a new birth introducing a new life.* Things in the Christians life are different because the Christian has been baptized and has *entered into a new union with Christ, and with one another!* Because they have been baptized they are *now members of Christ's body, the church, and should behave accordingly!*

We will consider baptism in Paul's thought somewhat chronologically, revealed through his primary epistles..

We will begin with Gal 3:24ff:

"the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ⁸

Galatians was possibly one of Paul's earliest epistles written to both Jews and Gentiles emphasizing that they are *no longer two people, Jew and Gentiles, but are now one family in Christ; they were united in one baptism into one body in Christ, Eph 4:1ff:*

"therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."⁹

In Galatians Paul is incensed that some were following a new gospel, not one which he had preached, and one that called Christians back to keeping the Law of Moses and circumcision.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."¹⁰

His argument is that the Law had served a purpose of leading the Jew to Christ, but now that Christ had come they were no longer under the Law, they were under Christ and faith in Christ. All Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, are children of God through faith in Jesus, and not through keeping the Law. Notice **Gal 3:27** where Paul introduces the subject of baptism. *It was through their baptism that they were united with Christ and put on Christ.* The introductory word "For" *explains how they became children of God through faith, for, through baptisms they became part of Christ, they were united with Christ, the ultimate son of God!* *Baptism takes faith beyond the sense of believing or trusting, and translates or transfers one into Christ.*

⁸ Gal 3:24-28

⁹ Eph 4:1-6.

¹⁰ Gal 1:6-7.

In similar vein, Paul wrote to another congregation divided in several opposing groups of disciples, some following Paul, some Peter, some other leaders. He argued that Christians are one people, not divided into sectarian groups.

Almost as though he were building on his argument in Gal 3 that we are all one in Christ through faith in Christ, Paul discussed a problem plaguing the Corinthian church, namely, that of division. They had been peptized into one group, followers of Jesus, not of Paul or Peter! Note this emphasis at **1 Cor 1:12-17** and **1 Cor 12:13**. “*What I mean is that each one of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”*”¹³ *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*¹⁴ *I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius;*¹⁵ *lest anyone should say that you were baptized in my name.*¹⁶ *(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)*¹⁷ *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

1 Cor 12:13. “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*”¹¹

Paul's argument against dividing into sub groups favoring certain church leaders is that *the body of Christ is not divided, that the disciples were not baptized into Cephas, or Apollos, or anyone else. They were all baptized into Christ, and Christ is not divided. Baptism was not the core of Paul's preaching; Christ was.* Paul argued throughout that discourse that although baptism is important, the Corinthians, because of their baptism were one body in Christ. *They may be different nationally, but because of being baptized into Christ they were one people, one body.*

Although in this context Paul's emphasis was on preaching only Christ, baptism still features prominently in Paul's theology and argument, for he has just made an argument from baptism; they were not baptized in the name of Paul, but of Christ!

In **1 Cor 12:13** he continued this argument by showing that *by one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, they were all baptized into one body, the body of Christ.* As we learned from **Acts 2:38** and **John 3:3-5**, *the Holy Spirit's presence in baptism brings about a new birth.* We are born into one family, the family of God *through our faith in Jesus Christ and by being baptized into Christ!* *We are baptized into one body, the one body of Christ.* Division and favoring one human being over others is against the will of Christ, and against the work of the Holy Spirit which Jesus said has serious consequences, Matt 12:31, *no eternal forgiveness!*

In the course of developing his argument against being divided over allegiance to church leaders, Paul makes this interesting statement: **1 Cor 1:14ff**, “*I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius;*¹⁵ *lest anyone should say that you were baptized in my name.*¹⁶ *(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)*¹⁷ *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”*

One could take this to mean that baptism was not important in Paul's theology. However, there are two major flaws in this reasoning:

First, this would lift the comment out of the context which Paul is discussing, which is the core of his message and theology, namely, *the gospel is all about the cross of Christ, and being in Christ.* **1 Cor 1:18** emphasizes this: “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*”

Paul's purpose in **1 Cor 1:17ff** was to emphasize being in Christ rather than in the one who baptized them is more important than the one who baptized them!

Second, this thinking would lift baptism out of Paul's own practice into the core of his theology, which is, *being in Christ!* In the same text Paul mentions that he did baptize Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas! The point Paul is making in the context of this text is that *being baptized by Paul was not that important. Being united in Christ by baptism is all important.* Notice verse 15; “*lest anyone should say that*

¹¹ 1 Co 12:13.

you were baptized in my name.” In Pauline theology the only manner by which one may be united with Christ, or entering Christ, was to be baptized into Christ!

We now turn to one of Paul’s most profound comments on baptism,

Rom 6:1-9, *being united with Christ in Baptism. “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. ⁹ For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ⁹ For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

In this epistle to the Romans Paul was explaining *the core of the doctrine he preached everywhere to both Jew and Gentile*, which gospel he planned to preach in Spain. His point was that both Jew and Gentile are justified by the same principle, grace through faith in Jesus Christ. *Baptism is central to this message in that it brought the repentant believer into contact with the death and resurrection of Jesus, the heart and power of that gospel!*

Justification does not come through personal works, through Jewish heritage, through the Law, or through human effort. *Justification is solely on the principle of grace through faith, for the Jew and for the Gentile.* Paul’s point was that in the gospel God shows no partiality. Both Jew and Gentile are lost through sin. Both will be saved by the same gospel, and obedient faith in Jesus! Paul has demonstrated that the whole world is under the power of sin and because of this will die. Paul’s argument in Romans is that the Law, although holy, spiritual, and good, served the purpose of indicting man for sin, not redeeming him from sin. The Law cannot save. It only indicts, and because of sin, the law, therefore, kills. Anticipating arguments that since we are now under grace and no longer under sin, we could sin and grace could abound! Paul will have nothing of this nonsense! *Μὴ γένοιτο*, “No, no. not ever”! His argument is that all were *dead in sin*, but are *now alive in Christ*. ***When you were baptized into Christ’s death you died to sin and a new person was born.*** *In baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with Christ. The old man is dead, the new man is alive. In baptism we are united with Christ, in a death like his, and in a resurrection like his. It is in baptism we that are united with Christ.*

This is a powerful message of baptism that in association with faith in Jesus lies at the very heart of redemption.

Now we note that in **Eph 4:1-6** *baptism is central to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, the purpose of God in Christ!*

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Paul’s point in Eph 4 emphasizes the urgency of maintaining *the unity into which the Holy Spirit has brought us through being baptized into one body*, **1 Cor 12:13**, *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*

Paul’s instruction was that Christians should so live that *they treat one another equally, maintaining the unity of the body of Christ*. A divisive spirit will destroy the unity of body of Christ which the Holy Spirit has created! So, Christian should live worthily of the Christian calling to maintain the unity of Christ! Disunity in the body of Christ is brought about when Christians no longer forbear one another in love. In the context of

developing his argument for the maintaining the unity of the Spirit, Paul demonstrates the foundation or reason for this unity. *There is only one Holy Spirit who baptizes us into one body*, therefore, there must be unity. *There is only one faith, one Lord, and one God the Father, therefore there can be only one body. Since there is only one baptism by which we are baptized into the one body*, there cannot be two bodies, one for Jews another for Gentiles! There must be Christian unity for the one body of Christ to survive. *Here baptism plays a pivotal role in Paul's argument for unity in the body. There is only one baptism! There can be only one body!*

At **Col 2:11-13** Paul returns to his theme of being buried with Christ in Baptism. *“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.”*

In this text, so much like **Rom 6:1ff**, Paul proclaims the symbiotic connection between baptism and the death of Jesus. However, the context here is Paul's view of the all-sufficiency of Christ. Philosophy may have a sense of wisdom, but in providing security from an evil spiritual world, philosophy fails completely. It is only in Christ, *in whom all the fullness of deity dwells, that we have no fear of the spiritual world*. Circumcision of the flesh cannot help, only being buried and raised with Christ is there hope. ***In baptism we are buried with Christ, but it is God who works in baptism, not us!*** Baptism is not a work of merit or of law. ***It is submitting in faith to the working of God. In baptism, man is passively submitting to the will and working of God***, and it is God through his power and the Holy Spirit who works with our faithful obedience and raises us to new life in Christ.

We draw attention to an excellent article on *Baptism in Colossians* by Jeffrey Peterson,, Professor of New Testament, Austin Graduate School of Theology, "The Circumcision of the Christ," "The Significance of Baptism in Colossians and the Churches of the Restoration", *Restoration Quarterly*, Vol 43/2, 2001.

Peterson makes three salient points:

First, as a symbolic climax of the Colossians' conversion, *baptism signifies the convert's transfer of allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord*.

Second, *baptism signifies entry into the eschatological covenant people (church, IAF) of God*.

Third, *baptism signifies the moral transformation of the people of God into the image of his Son*.

We recommend careful reading of this article.

Summary of Paul's Theology of Baptism

Paul's theology of baptism is primarily paranetic or practical, that is, Paul uses baptism to explain how Christians should live because they have died in baptism to their old life of sin, and been raised in baptism to a new life in Christ. Being united with Christ in baptism, Christians should live like Christ, not like the world. *It is through baptism that people enter Christ, are united with Christ, and are therefore, in Christ, wherein are all spiritual blessings*.

Baptism in John

John does not openly develop a significant theology of baptism, but there are instances in which we see a baptismal theme underlying the message of John.

We find the usual Gospel references to John regarding the John the Baptists baptism of Jesus, and Jesus and his disciples regarding baptizing, but beyond this, little is said directly regarding baptism.

However, in **John 3:3-5** Jesus discusses the new birth with Nicodemus.

“Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of

water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Key words in this discussion of the new birth are "**unless one is born of water and the Spirit.**" The expression "*born of water and the Spirit*" in the Greek read ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος "*unless one is born of water and Spirit*". The small coordinating conjunction καὶ, *and* forms a construction scholars call *hendiadys* in which two nouns in the same case are tied together in one context. Thus, one cannot separate *water* and *Spirit* into *two births* as some would do, having the water refer to physical birth and Spirit referring to spiritual birth. *The birth Jesus has in mind is the new birth, or the birth from above. Being born of water is a reference to baptism in which the Spirit is also active, hence one is born again, born anew, or born from above at baptism by the Holy Spirit.*

Although John does not present any fully developed baptismal theology we do see a form of baptismal development in this passage on the new birth in John 3:3-5:

A parallel passage in Paul would be **Tit 3:3-5**. "*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; ⁴ but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, ⁶ which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. ⁸ The saying is sure.”*

Paul's use of the Greek words *regeneration* and *renewal*, λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας, the *laver or washing of regeneration*, and ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου, the *renewal of the spirit* are interesting! It does not take any effort to see the parallel thought to Jesus' and John's 3:3-5, *the water of new birth and born again by the Spirit!*

Baptism in Peter

The family of baptism words is found only once in Peter, that is, in

1 Pet 3:13-23. "*Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? ¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶ and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong. ¹⁸ For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; ¹⁹ in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ **Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.”***

This is an interesting pericope! Peter discussed a challenging thought of *Jesus having reached to those who are now in prison*. There is much debate on the *preaching to those in prison*, but the salient point for the discussion on baptism is that **Peter compared the Noah flood experience to baptism which now saves!** Peter encouraged his readers to reverence Christ in their hearts, and to be willing to suffer for him. He introduced Noah and his family and their salvation from the flood to *make an analogous point!* **They were saved by water!** Having said that eight souls in Noah's day were *saved by water*, Peter added **that baptism corresponds to the salvation of the eight by water**. His statement is clear, "*baptism...now saves you!*" This salvation is not simply the removal of dirt from the body, but *results from a clear conscience in regard to God*. **The power of the salvation of baptism in Peter's mind is the resurrection of Jesus**. Somehow **baptism connects one with the resurrection of Jesus**.

This should not surprise us since Paul has also made this connection between baptism and the resurrection, **Rom 6:3ff**. Furthermore, baptism is the appeal, some translations *have answer of a good conscience*. *God*

Baptism/Salvation in Luke-Acts

Although the above pericope by Peter in 1 Peter is the only passage in Peter in which he discusses baptism, we do have two significant passages in Acts in which *Luke has recorded Peter's two key sermons in which baptism features prominently.*

The first was the great *Pentecost sermon* and, **the first Jewish converts, Acts 2:38**. The second, *Peter's sermon to Cornelius and his household, the first Gentile converts, Acts 10:48*. In both these sermons Peter "**commands**" that **the believers be baptized for salvation associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus.**

Several other texts in *Luke's book of Acts* stand out in any study of Baptism. We need to remember that Luke explained to Theophilus that his book was all about *what Jesus began to do in his ministry which were furthered in Acts.*

Note Luke's comment at **Acts 1:1-8**. "*In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, ⁵ for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."*

Luke's responsibility in Acts was to demonstrate that *the gospel of salvation in Jesus was meant for all men, not only to the Jews, indeed, also to the Gentiles.*

Luke began his narrative on *salvation* tying it to *Jesus' death and resurrection*. In remarkable fashion, he set his narrative of *salvation, repentance, baptism, and forgiveness of sins* all together in the great happenings of the *Day of Pentecost, Acts 2:1ff.*

We will pick up the Pentecost narrative with the section that introduced *baptism* associated with the *death and resurrection* of Jesus and the *powerful working of the Holy Spirit*. Peter wrapped this amazing narrative together in the first sermon preached by an Apostle of Jesus *after Jesus' resurrection*.

When many Jews heard Peter's powerful sermon on *death and resurrection, Acts 2:33-36*, they were *moved and believed* that they had crucified their *Messiah*. They asked Peter what they should do! His powerful response. "³⁷Now when they heard this they were **cut to the heart**, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "**Brethren, what shall we do?**" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "**Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**" ³⁹ For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him." ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." ⁴¹ So those who received his word **were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.**

We have already noted in this study the symbiotic relationship between *faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus, baptism, and the working of the Holy Spirit*. Peter brings them all together with his astonishing message of *repentance* in this *profoundly important text*. We will note in another study on **Acts 2:38** that some evangelical ministers in attempting to separate *salvation* from *baptism* substitute *because of the remission of sins* for the Greek preposition **εἰς**, *for*. Our major English Bibles all clearly state **for the remission of sins not because of the remission of sins. This is untenably incorrect**, for εἰς followed by an *accusative noun* as in **Acts 2:38 points forward in a direction, not backwards**. Our English translations of this text are precise in translating **εἰς** as *for*! Cf the KJV, ASV, RSV, NIV, the ESV and other excellent translations.

The next text on baptism we examine in Acts is **Acts 8:26-38**. In an interesting and powerful example, Phillip an early Christian evangelism was *sent by the Holy Spirit* to preach to an Ethiopian Eunuch, possibly a Jew, who had journeyed to Jerusalem, presumably for one of the Jewish feasts.

Luke records the event, “*But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert road.*”²⁷ *And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship*²⁸ *and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.*²⁹ *And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”*³⁰ *So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?”*³¹ *And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*³² *Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:*

*“As a sheep led to the slaughter
or a lamb before its shearer is dumb,
so he opens not his mouth.³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken up from the earth.”*

³⁴ *And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”*³⁵ ***Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus.***³⁶ *And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?”*³⁸ *And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.*

Several salient points surface in this text! *First*, this represents the spread of the gospel message beyond the borders of Jerusalem and Judea! The man was from Ethiopia, possibly a devout Jew of proselyte – he had just travelled to Jerusalem for the feast. He was reading the *Torah* and was concerned about whom the prophet was speaking. *Second*, Philip told him the Isaiah text was about Jesus who had been slain as a lamb in humiliation without justice, obviously referring to Jesus’ trial before the Romans and his subsequent death and resurrection. *Third*, the Eunuch believed him and when they arrived at a place where here was water he asked why he would not be baptized. *Fourth*, obviously, Philip had told the Eunuch about belief in Jesus and baptism. *Fifth*, this baptism obviously involved enough water for baptism, not simply for sprinkling for they would most assuredly have had some water with them in the chariot! *Sixth*, they stopped he chariot, the Eunuch and Philip *went down into the water for baptism, immersion, and came up out of the water.* *Seventh*, the Eunuch went on his way rejoicing! Why? He had just been saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus through his faith in Jesus and baptism into Jesus!

Paul now enters into Luke’s narrative as Saul. Saul was an elitist Pharisee with considerable Jewish influence. Saul lived as a rigid Jew under the *Torah*, or old covenant. He enters our story in a new and profoundly significant way! He was still making war on the Christians in Jerusalem and soon to be in Damascus. However, he was about to enter a new kind of life, As a Christian in Christ! We read about this on two different occasions, first at **Acts 9:1-19**, where Luke recounts Paul’s conversion, and then at **Acts 22:1-16** where Paul fills in some of the details of his conversion when on a trip to Damascus.

¹ *But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest*² *and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*³ ***Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him.***⁴ ***And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”***⁵ *And he said, “Who are you, Lord?”* *And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting;*⁶ *but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”*⁷ *The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.*⁸ ***Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing;*** *so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.*⁹ *And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

¹⁰ *Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.”* *And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”*¹¹ *And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying,*¹² *and he has*

*seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and **here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name.**”¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, **for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;** ¹⁶ **for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.**”¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “**Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.**”¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. **Then he rose and was baptized,**¹⁹ and took food and was strengthened.*

I have tried to simplify this story but have come to realize that you cannot tell it better than Luke! Note some high points. Under the Jewish *Torah* Saul thought he could *see the light*, but it was not until he encountered the Holy Spirit and Jesus that he finally did. He was blinded until he was transformed by the power of God and the Holy Spirit. It is intensely striking that all this took place under the guidance of God, Jesus, and the working of the Holy Spirit, and that **this reached a zenith place when he was baptized!**

The importance of Saul’s, or Paul’s experience, takes on new light when Paul later explains this in his defense of his ministry at **Acts 22:1-16**. For convenience I will focus more on a few words as Paul tells the story! It heightens the significance of baptism in the gospel story as well in Paul’s life and gospel message!

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘**Brother Saul, receive your sight.**’ And in that very hour **I received my sight and saw him.**”¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? **Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.**’

Later in Acts 10 and 11 Luke records that the Holy Spirit led Peter into introducing a new major experience in his gospel narrative, *the inclusion of the Gentiles into the kingdom of Jesus!*

At Acts 10 and 11, we read of Peter, who had preached the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost to Jews, instructed by the Holy Spirit to preach to a Gentile, Cornelius! Luke was moving the story from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria into *all the world*, for *the Gentile world was another world*, a different world!

Acts 10:1-48: This is a long txt but so important to the gospel theology that we must look at it in some detail! Bear with me!

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴ And he stared at him in terror, and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ **And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter;** ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those that waited on him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood before the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, **"Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them."** ²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" ²² And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So he called them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered; ²⁸ and he said to them, **"You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."**

³⁰ And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, ³¹ saying, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside.' ³³ So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. **Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.**"

³⁴ And Peter opened his mouth and said: **"Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. **They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."****

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ **"Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"** ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. **Then they asked him to remain for some days.**

Fortunately, to understand the full impact of this Cornelius event, Luke continued the narrative in **Acts 11**. I am including a few verses to fill out the impact of these events. When the Jewish Christians heard of Cornelius' baptism, they were concerned that Peter had preached to and baptized a Gentile, so Peter explained this "disturbing" and "confusing" event for them, **Acts 11:12-18**. Speaking of the three men who had come to Peter from Cornelius, Luke records:

And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brethren also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which

you will be saved, you and all your household.’¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?”¹⁸ When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.”

Notice the series of theological points that Luke covers in this Cornelius narrative

First, the story told by Peter includes the activity of the Holy Spirit. The *effective involvement* of the Holy Spirit is evident throughout the events of the narrative.

Second, it relates the story of the *death and resurrection* is the heart of the gospel message.

Third, the preaching or teaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus is primary to the events and activity of the Holy Spirit. The death and resurrection of Jesus is *the power of the gospel message*, as explained by Paul at Rom 1:16, 17.

Fourth, The gospel message has to be *heard, believed, and obeyed*, culminating in *the baptism of the believer for* the remission of sin and a new birth in Christ. Cf. Acts 2:37, 38; Acts 8:37, 38; Acts 9:17, 18; Acts 10 and 11; and Acts 22:12-16.

Fifth, the narrative of Acts 10 and 11, fall within the theology of Luke’s narrative, which involves both Jews and Gentiles in the conversion story, the gospel is a *universal* gospel message! It was not only for the Jews, but for everyone who would believe and obey it, Jew and Gentile, without partiality, which is the theological story of Paul’s Roman message. At Acts 2:38 Peter’s instruction, although directed here to the Jewish believers, had the universal element bedded within it; *Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*

Summary of Baptism Texts in the New Testament

Baptism in the Gospels

Although the family of baptism words appear *only 2 times* in the Gospel of John, both in John 3, the words related to baptism appear *at least 50 times* in the Gospels. The words appear basically in *four* different *settings* or *contexts*.

Adding the many references to baptism in its various forms together we find that *baptism* appears *over 90 times* in the New Testament which should indicate that *baptism* should play a significant role in the life of every *Christian* and every *church*.

1) John the Baptists' practice of baptism

Baptism: Matt 3:6; Matt 21:25; Mk 1:4; Mk 11:30; Lk 3:3; Lk 7:29; Lk 20:4.

These references to baptism prior to Jesus' death and resurrection are related to the veracity or effectiveness of John's pre-Christian baptism.

They were for the forgiveness of sins, predicated by repentance and not faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. They were empowered under the Mosaic sacrificial system, not under Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Baptize: Matt 3:11; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:26; Jn 1:33

Baptized: Matt 3:6; Matt 3:13, 14, 16; Mk 1:5, 8, 9; Lk 3:7, 12, 21; Lk 7:29, 30; Jn 10:40

Baptizer: Mk 1:4; Mk 6:14, 24

Baptist: Matt 3:1; Matt 11:11, 12; Matt 14:2, 8; Matt 16:14; Matt 17:13; Mk 6:25; Mk 8:28; Lk 7:20, 33; Lk 9:19

2) Jesus' and his disciples' practice of baptism. *baptize:* Jn 4:2; Jn 3:22, 23.

Jesus, through his disciples practiced baptism, but this was like John's baptism predicated by the Mosaic sacrificial system.

3) Christian baptism. *baptize:* Matt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Mk 16:16.

These references to baptism relate to the future Christian baptism associated with Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

4) *Symbolic uses.* Mk 10:38, 39; Lk 12:50.

Lk 12:50. They refer to the concept of baptism as an immersion or life fulfillment relating baptism to Jesus' sacrificial death into which, or through which Jesus had to pass.

Baptism in Luke-Acts

The baptism family of words is found *at least 26 times* in Acts.

The efficacy of these baptisms is their relationship to Luke's purpose in writing Luke-Acts demonstrating that John's baptism was germane for Jews under the Mosaic system, and not to Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for all people, both Jews and Gentiles.

1) **John the Baptists Baptism, 10 times:** Acts 1:5; Acts 1:22; Acts 19:3, 4; Acts 10:37; Acts 11:16; Acts 13:24; Acts 18:25; Acts 19:3, 4.

2) **Christian Baptism, 16 times:** Acts 1:5; Acts 2:38, 41; Acts 8:12, 13, 16, 36, 38; Acts 9:18; Acts 10:48; Acts 11:16; Acts 16:15, 33; Acts 18:8; Acts 19:5; Acts 22:16.

Baptism in Paul

This family of words is found *at least 14 times* in Paul.

The interesting point with Paul's references to baptism in his epistles was that Paul was not writing to or for the unsaved or undisciplined, but was writing to and for churches already saved under Jesus' baptism.

Paul was explaining to Christians what “benefits” or blessings they had under Christ’s baptism, atonement, salvation, redemption, reconciliation, and a new life and birth.

Christian Baptism: Rom 6:3, 4; Eph 4:5; Col 2:12; 1 Cor 1:13, 14-17; 1 Cor 12:13, 1 Cor 15:29

Symbolic: 1 Cor 10:2

Baptism in Peter

Christian Baptism: 1 Pet 3:21.

Peter’s one reference to baptism in his epistles relates to forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus, obedience, a clear conscience before God (faith, trusting) and the waters of baptism as with Noah.