

What is Baptism? & Why is it Important?



What is Baptism?

Let's begin with a definition.

- *Baptism*: a ceremonial immersion in water, or application of water, as an initiatory rite or sacrament of the Christian church.¹

This is a general definition which could be applied to any number of practices that are used by Christian churches. However, to get an even fuller understanding of what baptism should be, we need to look at the Bible and see how it was practiced by Jesus and His disciples. For that we will also need to look at the words used in the original language the Bible was written in, Greek.

- **baptízō (G907)**; fut. **baptísō**, from **báptō (G911)**, to dip. Immerse, submerge for a religious purpose, to overwhelm, saturate, baptize.²
- **báptō (G911)**; fut. **bápsō**. To immerse, dip³

From these definitions, we can only draw one conclusion—the proper means of baptism is to be completely submerged into or fully immersed into something. Let's look at some references to baptism found in the New Testament to see what medium should be used in baptism.⁴

1 (“Baptism”)

2 (Zhodiatas et al. G907)

3 (Zhodiatas et al. G911)

4 Adapted from (Reese 75)

- **water**—[Acts 10:47 NASB](#) "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?"
- **Much water**—[John 3:22-23 NASB](#) After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. [23](#) John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and *people* were coming and were being baptized—
- **Going to water**—[Matthew 3:13 NASB](#) Then Jesus *arrived from Galilee at the Jordan *coming* to John, to be baptized by him.
- **Administered in water**—[Mark 1:9 NASB](#) In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.
- **Down into water**—[Acts 8:36-39 NASB](#) As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [37](#) [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] [38](#) And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. [39](#) When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord

snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.

- **Coming out of water**—**Matthew 3:16 NASB** After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him [see also Acts 8:39 above]
- **Like a burial**—**Romans 6:3-7 NASB** Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?
4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.
5 For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, **6** knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; **7** for he who has died is freed from sin.
- **A Resurrection**—**Colossians 2:12 NASB** having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. [see also Romans 6:5 above]

- **Bodies Washed**—**Hebrews 10:22 NASB** let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

I believe that the textual evidence is clear that baptism is to be preformed in a sufficient amount of water to be able to fully submerge the person being baptized. This is to represent a person's death to his old life of sin and being resurrected into a new life of faith in Jesus.

Why is it Important?

First let's look at Jesus' baptism. We find the event is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. We also find John the Baptist's testimony regarding Jesus' baptism to the religious leaders of the time recorded in John.

- **Matthew 3:13-17 NASB** Then Jesus *arrived from Galilee at the Jordan *coming* to John, to be baptized by him. **14** But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" **15** But Jesus answering said to him, "**Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**" Then he *permitted Him. **16** After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending

as a dove *and* lighting on Him, **17** and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

- **Mark 1:9-11 NASB** In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; **11** and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."
- **Luke 3:21-22 NASB** Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, **22** and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."
- **John 1:29-34 NASB** The next day he **saw* Jesus coming to him and **said*, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! **30** "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' **31** "I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." **32** John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. **33** "I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me

to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' 34 "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Something that is important to see is Jesus' remarks to John the Baptist as recorded by Matthew.

"Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus believed that it was a necessary part of fulfilling His ministry which God the Father had sent Him to do. We can be sure of this because of what Matthew, Mark, and Luke record regarding the Spirit descending like a dove and of a voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be God's Son and that God is well-pleased with Jesus.

So it is pretty clear from the Bible that Jesus thought that His being baptized was a necessary event to take place. Now let's skip ahead to the end of Jesus' time on earth when He is getting ready to ascend into heaven and look at the final instructions that He gives to His disciples.

- **Matthew 28:16-20 NASB** But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. 17 When they saw Him, they worshiped *Him*; but some were doubtful. 18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in

heaven and on earth. 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

- **Mark 16:14-16 NASB** Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining *at the table*; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. 15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16 "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.
- **Luke 24:44-49 NASB** Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 "You are witnesses of these things. 49 "And behold, I am

sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

From these three accounts we can draw these conclusions.

1. Jesus told His disciples that they were to baptize others who came to believe in Jesus and wanted to be His disciple as well.
2. This command was not limited a particular people group but was open to the whole world or all of creation.
3. That baptism was to be done in faith for the forgiveness of sins.

The last conclusion is also supported by what Jesus taught Nicodemus as recorded by John. It will also be important to watch what John records Jesus and His disciples doing immediately after Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus.

- **John 3:2-8 NASB** this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."
3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
4 Nicodemus *said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's

womb and be born, can he?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into 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 be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

- John 3:14-18 NASB "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order for someone to be born again, they must be baptized of water and Spirit. The water part is easy to understand. Jesus is referring to baptism. We can see that by the references at the end of John 3 and the beginning of John 4 where we find Jesus and His disciples baptizing in water.

- **John 3:22 NASB** After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.
- **John 4:1-3 NASB** Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John **2** (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), **3** He left Judea and went away again into Galilee.

It is also important to see that someone be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28). This isn't some special formula that must be recited over a person while they are being baptized, although it is fitting to be said at the time. Being baptized in the name of someone has a deeper significance to it. Consider the words of Peter on the Day of Pentecost to the crowds gathered to celebrate the Jewish festival.

- **Acts 2:36-41 NASB** "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." **37** Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" **38** Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** "For the promise is for you and your children and for all

who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Peter was proclaiming that to be saved / born-again, a person needs to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, repent (stop living their sinful lives), and be baptized in the name of Jesus to receive forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

This idea of being baptized into Jesus' name (or the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) needs to be addressed in relation to baptism. As I mentioned earlier, this isn't some mystical formula that needs to be recited over someone while they are being baptized but it is significant. Consider this from the IVP Bible Background Commentary regarding Peter's message in Acts 2.

Peter instructs the people how to call on the Lord's name ([Act 2:21](#)): be baptized in Jesus' name. Because baptism was a sign of conversion to Judaism normally reserved for pagans, Peter's demand would offend his Jewish hearers and cost them respectability. He calls for a public, radical testimony of conversion, not a private, noncommittal request for salvation with no conditions. "In the name of Jesus Christ"

distinguishes this sort of baptism, requiring faith in Christ, from other ancient baptisms; this phrase simply means that the person being baptized confesses Christ. (Acts always uses this phrase with “be baptized”—the passive, never the active; it does not denote a formula said over the person being baptized, but rather indicates the confession of faith of the person receiving baptism; see [Act 2:21](#) and [Act 22:16](#).)⁵

Thus repentant believer baptism by immersion in water in the name of Jesus is the biblical approach that should be practiced by Jesus’ disciples.

Examples of Early Christians in Acts

The Ethiopian Eunuch—Acts 8:26-39

[Acts 8:26-39 NASB](#) But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert *road*.) [27](#) So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, [28](#) and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. [29](#) Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join

5 (Walton et al. Acts 2:37-38)

this chariot." 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. 33 "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." 34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. 36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 37 [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.

Saul of Tarsus—Acts 9:10-18

Acts 9:10-18 NASB Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord *said* to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision 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 harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14 and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized;

Cornelius and his household—Acts 10:34-48

Acts 10:34-48 NASB Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)— 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 "*You know of* Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and *how* He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 "We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." 44 While Peter was still

speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

In each of these cases, baptism was administered in a sufficient amount of water to fully immerse a person and the person being baptized had come to faith in Jesus as God's Son who could save them from their sins.

What about Infant Baptism?

The most common argument for infant baptism is that it is replacing circumcision as the sign of the covenant for God's people. Based on what we have looked at above, I think there is clear evidence for supporting believer baptism by immersion as the biblical mode of baptism.⁶

- Circumcision was a sign for a physical, political group—descendants of Abraham.

6 (Piper 127-35)

- Baptism is a sign for a spiritual group of believers of faith from every nation.
- There is a distinction between the two groups which means there needs to be different signs. This began with John the Baptist's baptism.

Conclusion

The definition of baptism using both the English translation and the original Greek words refers to something being fully immersed or plunged into something. From the descriptions of Jesus' baptism, the activities of His disciples, the baptisms of the first Christians in Acts and other references in the New Testament, that something should be water and there should sufficient amount of it to fully cover the person being baptized.

We also see that Jesus thought that it was necessary for Himself to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. He taught His disciples to baptize people. In Jesus' final instructions to His disciples, He instructed them to go and make more disciples and baptize them and then teach them to obey His teachings and do the same also.

Regarding infant baptism, I don't believe the New Testament scriptures nor the practice of Jesus' disciples and the early Christians would support infant baptism.

Bibliography

- “Baptism - Dictionary.Com.” *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, Random House, Inc., 2018, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/baptism?s=t>.
- Piper, John. *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*. Broadman & Holman, 2002.
- Reese, Gareth L. *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts*. College Press, 1976.
- Walton, John H., et al. *IVP Bible Background Commentary*. InterVarsity Press; e-Sword, 2000.
- Zhodiates, Spiro, et al. *The Complete Word Study Bible and Dictionary*. e-Sword, 1993.



James Swanson –
StudyTheBook.org



This work by James Swanson is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) International License.

© 2018 All rights reserved.

Created: 07/21/2018; Updated: 12/22/2018
