

# Should We Be Baptized?

**Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately [diligently] the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:24-26)<sup>1</sup>**

**There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)**

## Introduction

Although most, if not all, Christian denominations require or strongly encourage water baptism, they vary greatly in the purpose and/or manner of baptism. In fact, the main difference between some of the denominations is based on the purpose, or prescribed manner, of baptism. What is the purpose of water baptism? More importantly, should we be baptized? What does the Bible say about baptism?

## Baptisms in the Bible

The word *baptism* and its variants, including *baptisms* and *baptize*, only occur in the New Testament. They are translated from the Greek words *baptismōs*, *baptisma*, and *baptizō*, meaning washings or cleansings. The equivalent Hebrew word for a ceremonial washing or bathing is *râchats*. These words are used in the following ways in Scripture:

- A ceremonial washing with water of the priests of Israel (Exodus 29:1-4; 30:17-21; 40:12)
- Washing seven times in the Jordan River to cure a man of leprosy (II Kings 5:1-14)
- The people of Israel were baptized into Moses (I Corinthians 10:1-4)
- Various washings (*baptismōs*) under the old covenant (Hebrews 9:8-10)
- Water baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Matthew 3:5-6; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:3-8; Acts 2:38)
- Christ referred to His future crucifixion as a baptism to be baptized with (Matthew 20:22-23 [KJV])
- A ceremonial washing of pots, pitchers, and cups by the Pharisees (Mark 7:3-4)
- Christ would baptize His disciples with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11)
- Moving to maturity, beyond the doctrine of baptisms (Hebrews 6:1-3 [KJV])
- Upon believing the gospel of salvation we are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13; Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27)

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<sup>1</sup> All references are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible* (1996). Words in brackets are either equivalent words from the *King James Version* (KJV) or, if in italics, were added by the author for clarification.

- Those who are baptized into Christ are baptized into His death (Romans 6:3-4)
- We are buried with Christ in baptism (Colossians 2:12)
- There is one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-6)
- A saving baptism related to, or associated with, the resurrection of Christ (I Peter 3:21)

Some of the baptisms referred to above involved water. They were ceremonial or representative *washings* that signified a purification or cleansing. Jesus referred to His pending crucifixion as a baptism, which didn't involve water. Some of the references use baptism to describe our identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and represent an act of God associated with our salvation without the use of water. One reference represents the people of Israel's relationship with Moses as a baptism, which was a spiritual identification that didn't involve water. Another reference signifies how believers received, through a miraculous baptism, the power of the Holy Spirit that gave them the ability to perform miracles, speak in tongues, prophesy, and know the will of God (sometimes referred to as *sign gifts*). Finally, one reference tells us there is one baptism. What is that baptism, when Scripture definitely describes more than one baptism? These various baptisms will be addressed in this study.

### Scriptural Origin of Water Baptism

Baptism, in a physical sense, means to wash or bathe, signifying a cleansing or purification. When John the Baptist started baptizing the people of Judea, the act of baptism wasn't a surprise or something new to the people. Baptism was an Old Testament ordinance—it was part of the Law of Moses.

- Israel was to become a nation of priests (Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 61:6).
- The first ceremony for the anointing of a priest was to be *washed* (Exodus 29:1-4). This symbolic washing made the priest holy before the Lord God, so that he wouldn't die when entering the tabernacle (Exodus 30:17-21).
- Sprinkling water, using a branch of hyssop, ceremonially cleansed or purified an unclean person (Numbers 19:14-19; Psalm 51:5-9).<sup>2</sup>

Israel was not obedient to God and did not become a nation of priests. However, after the close of this dispensation of grace, Israel will repent, be redeemed, and become a nation of priests (I Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6; 20:6). This will occur as an integral part of Israel's long-promised kingdom (I Chronicles 17:9-14; Psalm 89:3-4, 34-37; II Samuel 7:12-16; Acts 1:6; 3:18-26). When God redeems Israel, He will *sprinkle clean water* on them (probably figuratively, but a baptism nevertheless) to purify them (Ezekiel 36:22-28).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The ceremonial washing (*baptismōs*) of pots, pitchers, and cups by the Pharisees was one of the many traditions that the spiritual leaders *added* to the Law of Moses—it was a tradition of man that invalidated the word of God (Mark 7:1-13).

<sup>3</sup> God's prophetic plan for Israel is discussed in the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)**.

## The Baptism Proclaimed by John

John the Baptist's birth, Jesus' birth, and John's ministry were the beginning of fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's promised kingdom with Messiah as King. John's ministry to make ready the way of the Lord was prophesied (Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1). Furthermore, John came baptizing with water so that Christ would be manifested (made known, or revealed) to Israel as the Lamb of God and the Son of God (John 1:29-34; Isaiah 53:7).

Additionally, John the Baptist's ministry was in fulfillment of the prophecy concerning Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6). John the Baptist denied that he was Elijah, which is true because he was John, born of Zacharias and Elizabeth (John 1:21-25; Luke 1:5-17). However, Jesus said that John the Baptist was the prophet Elijah who was to come and prepare the way for the Messiah (Matthew 11:7-14; 17:9-13; Mark 1:2-4; Malachi 3:1). The prophecy about Elijah, therefore, was referring to John the Baptist instead of the man Elijah.<sup>4</sup> This is similar to the prophecy concerning David sitting on the throne in the kingdom, which was actually referring to Christ and not to the man David (Ezekiel 37:24; Acts 2:22-35).

John the Baptist, Jesus (while He was on earth), and His disciples all proclaimed that *the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (Matthew 3:1-3; 4:17; 10:5-7).<sup>5</sup> In accordance with prophecy, Israel had to repent and be cleansed from unrighteousness before God could establish their promised kingdom. John used the Old Testament practice (as required by the Law of Moses) of water baptism as the symbol for cleansing from sin and uncleanness. That someone came baptizing the people of Judea was expected; what the people didn't understand, however, was that John was the man spoken of by the prophets (John 1:25).

Water baptism was an integral part of the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 3:5-6; 28:19-20; John 3:22; 4:1-2). The baptism of John was for repentance and forgiveness of sins, so it was a requirement for salvation (Mark 16:16). Therefore, this baptism was an ordinance of God.

**Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:1-2)**

**John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)**

At Pentecost, after Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven, the baptism of John was still required for salvation (Acts 2:38). Although some teach that water baptism should follow repentance for the remission of sins, this is not what Peter proclaimed to the people at Pentecost. Additionally, some teach that water baptism should be accompanied by the words "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" to be valid (Matthew 28:19). However, Peter didn't use these exact words at Pentecost, so the Matthew 28:19 reference didn't prescribe the words to be said during a baptism, but signified that the apostles were to baptize in the name of, or by the authority of, the Godhead. As John's ministry was making the way for Israel's Messiah, his baptisms from the beginning were by the authority

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<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist was not Elijah reincarnated, because reincarnation is not a doctrine of the Bible. Also, although Elijah was taken up into heaven without dying (II Kings 2:1-12), he is not mentioned as returning in the book of Revelation. Therefore, Malachi 4:5-6 was referring to John the Baptist, who would be a prophet like Elijah (Matthew 11:9-11).

<sup>5</sup> The *kingdom of heaven* in the book of Matthew is the same as the *kingdom of God* in equivalent passages in Mark, Luke, and John. Both refer to Israel's promised kingdom with Messiah as King.

of God (Matthew 3:11-12; John 1:19-34). Water baptism, therefore, had not changed since it was instituted by John the Baptist.

**Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness [remission] of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)**

Furthermore, the baptism of John continued to be practiced as long as the gospel of the kingdom was preached to Israel. In his ministry to the Jews in Ephesus, Apollos was still incorporating the baptism of John quite some time after Pentecost (Acts 18:24-25). Even later, the believing Jews in Jerusalem were still zealous for the Law of Moses, so they would have been implementing the baptism of John, also (Acts 21:17-20). **Is water baptism for repentance and remission of sins still required today?**

### **Why was Christ Baptized?**

As we have seen, John came baptizing with water so that Christ would be revealed to His people (Israel) as the Son of God and as the one who would take away their sins (as the Lamb of God). When John baptized Jesus, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove onto Jesus, at which time God declared Him to be His Son (Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:32-34).

John’s baptism was of repentance for the remission of sins, so why would Jesus, who was sinless, need to be baptized (II Corinthians 5:21; I Peter 2:21-22)? Jesus told John that His baptism was necessary to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). How did it fulfill all righteousness?

- Israel was to be a nation of priests, and Christ would be their High Priest (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15). Because the Law of Moses required the priests to be ceremonially washed with water, Jesus’ baptism was in accordance with the Law.
- According to prophecy, Jesus was to be numbered with the transgressors; that is, identified with sinners (Isaiah 53:12). Because the people who came to John to be baptized did so for repentance and remission of sins, Jesus identified Himself with the sinners by being baptized.

Although Isaiah 53:12 was specifically referring to the death of Christ for the sins of His people (Isaiah 53:4-6), Jesus’ baptism was the first step in identifying Himself with sinners. His crucifixion as a criminal with other criminals completed that identification with sinners (Luke 22:37). Jesus referred to His pending crucifixion as a baptism that He was to be baptized with—He fully identified with mankind by taking on all of our sin and paying the price for that sin (Matthew 20:22-23; II Corinthians 5:21; Romans 6:8-11; Philippians 2:5-8). Therefore, the water baptism of Jesus was the initial step in fulfilling all righteousness.

Many of us who have been water baptized did so, at least in part, to follow Jesus in baptism.<sup>6</sup> Consider again why Jesus was baptized: to be made manifest to Israel, to be counted with sinners, to meet the requirements for a High Priest, and to fulfill all righteousness. No baptism today accomplishes any of those things. **Brethren, how can we possibly follow Jesus in baptism?**

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<sup>6</sup> The author was water baptized as an infant, and then baptized through immersion as a teenager as required for membership in a church that taught that we should follow Jesus in baptism.

## Water Baptism and Miraculous Signs

Every specific example of water baptism in the Bible is preceded, accompanied, or followed by something miraculous. As part of *the great commission*<sup>7</sup> to His disciples, Jesus said that miraculous signs would accompany those who believed the gospel of the kingdom and were baptized (Mark 16:15-18). The specific examples of water baptism and associated miracles are described as follows:

- Matthew 3:13-17—Immediately after Jesus was baptized by John, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him like a dove, and the voice of God declared Jesus to be His Son.
- Acts 2:38, 43—During Pentecost, those who repented and were baptized for the remission of sins received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and many signs and wonders took place through the apostles.
- Acts 8:9-13—After Simon was baptized by Philip, he observed signs and great miracles.
- Acts 8:34-40—After the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized by Philip, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, miraculously transporting him to another city.
- Acts 9:1-19—Saul (Paul) was miraculously blinded by a light from heaven and then spoken to by the resurrected Jesus Christ. Later he was filled with the Holy Spirit and his sight was restored when Ananias laid his hands on him; Ananias then baptized him.
- Acts 10:30-48—When the Roman centurion and the other Gentiles with him believed Peter’s message about Christ, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues and exalting God; then they were baptized.
- Acts 16:13-18—Not long after Paul baptized Lydia and her household, he cast a spirit of divination out of a girl.
- Acts 16:25-34—A miraculous earthquake opened the cell doors and unfastened the prisoners’ chains in the prison holding Paul and Silas. The jailer and his household believed the message of Paul regarding the Lord Jesus and were baptized.

Although miracles occurred before or after, in the last two specific instances of water baptism there is no mention of Lydia, the jailer, or their families being filled with the Holy Spirit, anyone speaking in tongues, or a demonstration of other sign gifts at the time of the baptisms. This omission *may* be significant. As discussed later, the purpose of water baptism changed during the Acts period, so it is likely that the demonstration of sign gifts associated with baptism also changed.

**Did a miracle obvious to those around you accompany your baptism?** Some people today claim that miracles such as speaking in tongues and healing accompanied their baptism, but were they miracles of God? Miracles were performed by the twelve apostles and other disciples in accordance with *the great commission* and as recorded in the book of Acts (Mark 16:15-18; Acts 2:1-6, 43; 3:1-10; 4:29-33; 5:1-10, 12-16; 6:8; 8:6-7; 9:36-42). The demonstration of miraculous sign gifts was proof that the apostles and disciples were truly representing the resurrected Jesus Christ as they preached the gospel of the kingdom to the people of Israel.

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<sup>7</sup> Although not called as such in the Bible, *the great commission* consists of the instructions that Jesus gave to His eleven disciples after His resurrection and prior to His ascension into heaven (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:1-8).

During the early part of his ministry, Paul also performed many miracles including speaking in tongues, casting out demons, healing the sick or lame, and raising the dead (Acts 13:6-12; 14:3, 8-10; 16:16-18; 19:6; 19:11-12; 20:7-12; 28:8-9; I Corinthians 14:18-19). The purpose of Paul's miracles was to prove to the Jews that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ—it was his primary credential as an apostle in their eyes (Acts 15:6-12; II Corinthians 12:11-12; I Corinthians 1:22). However, the Jews as a whole rejected Paul's testimony and teaching, in addition to that of Jesus and His disciples, so God set Israel aside and temporarily blinded (hardened) the nation to the truth of God—continuing to this day (Romans 11:25; II Corinthians 3:14-15; see also Acts 13:44-48; 18:5-6; 28:25-28).<sup>8</sup> With the setting aside of Israel, there was no longer a need for miraculous signs. Only in his first letter to the Corinthian brethren did Paul mention sign gifts and, in that letter, he said that they would pass away (I Corinthians 13:8-13).<sup>9</sup> During the latter part of his ministry, Paul was unable to heal his coworkers, which signified that sign gifts had indeed passed away as he said they would (Philippians 2:25-27; I Timothy 5:23; II Timothy 4:20).

Brethren, God is *not* performing miracles through the agency of man as He did during the Acts period.<sup>10</sup> Anyone who claims to have the gift of healing, speaking in tongues, etc., is taking the name of God in vain and is serving someone other than God, whether they realize it or not. Therefore, any miracles that may accompany baptisms or any other activity in this day are either: imagined, the work of our old sin nature, the work of Satan who deceptively operates as an angel of light, or the work of Satan's servants who disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (II Corinthians 11:13-15; Colossians 2:16-23).<sup>11</sup>

### The Purpose of Baptism Changed

Saul (later called Paul—Acts 13:9) was a Jewish Pharisee who was considered among his peers to be blameless according to the Law of Moses (Philippians 3:4-6). He was present and gave his approval of the stoning of Stephen who, in a brief summary of Israel's disobedience to God, accused Israel of killing its prophets and Messiah (Acts 7:51 – 8:1). Immediately after Stephen's death, Paul began a personal quest to destroy the church. As he zealously ravaged the church by gathering up disciples of Jesus (also known as belonging to *the Way*) for imprisonment and death (Acts 8:1-3; 9:21; 22:4; Galatians 1:13), Paul proved to be the chief (foremost) of sinners because he was the leading enemy of Christ (Acts 9:1-5; I Timothy 1:12-16).

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the setting aside of Israel, see the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** and **The Two Messages of Our Lord Jesus Christ**.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that the Corinthian brethren, apparently the least spiritually mature of the believers Paul ministered to, exhibited sign gifts. However, they were guilty of misusing them, particularly the gift of tongues (I Corinthians 3:1-3; 14:1-40). The believers during the early Acts period, who were controlled by the Holy Spirit, did not misuse the sign gifts (Acts 8:18-24).

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that God doesn't perform miracles today. For example, it is miraculous when a person is saved, because that person is transformed from death to life by the working of God (Ephesians 2:4-7; Colossians 2:9-13). It is probable that God is performing other miracles among us. If so, He is doing it in a manner such that no person can take credit.

<sup>11</sup> Satan's work is deceptive in this dispensation of grace. When the gospel of the kingdom resumes after *the rapture*, however, his work will be obvious as he will prowl about like a lion (I Peter 5:8). See the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** for more information on this subject.

At his request, Paul had been given authority by the spiritual leaders in Jerusalem to gather up followers of Jesus in Damascus for imprisonment (Acts 9:1-2, 13-14). While on his way to Damascus to find and detain believers, Paul was miraculously blinded and spoken to by the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ who saved him for the purpose of appointing him to be the Apostle of the Gentiles (Acts 9:3-16; 22:1-16; Romans 11:13). After Paul believed what Christ and Ananias told him, he regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was then baptized with water (Acts 9:17-18). This is the first example where being filled with, or baptized with, the Holy Spirit (as demonstrated when Paul regained his sight) occurred *before* water baptism instead of after. Furthermore, it is interesting that there is no record in Scripture that Paul repented of his sins as part of his baptism, even though he sinned directly against Christ. However, in his case water baptism was still a symbolic washing away of sins as it always had been (Acts 22:16).

Sometime after Paul's salvation and baptism, Peter received a vision from the Holy Spirit to meet with the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:19-20). The significance of this was immense because Peter knew from Jesus' last commands that the disciples were not to go to the Gentiles until Israel had repented, which they hadn't done (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:6-8; 10:28-29). As with Paul, Cornelius and his men were baptized by Peter *after* they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and were speaking in tongues and exalting God (Acts 10:44-48). This was a new experience for Peter, and he recognized that God had granted the repentance<sup>12</sup> that leads to life to the Gentiles (remember, this occurred after Paul, the chosen Apostle of the Gentiles, was saved), but there is no record of Cornelius or the others confessing their sins (Acts 11:15-18). God required repentance from the people of Israel because of their disobedience to God and for killing their Messiah, whereas the Gentiles had always been separated from God and did not have a promised Messiah. Peter recalled this experience later when he defended Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles before a council of apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-11).

Therefore, beginning with Paul's baptism, the purpose of water baptism had changed. Instead of a requirement to be saved and to receive the power of the Holy Spirit, it now was conducted *after* a person was saved and *after* a miraculous demonstration of the Holy Spirit. However, it continued to represent the washing away of sins as it had since instituted during the Law of Moses. **Is that the purpose of water baptism today, in this dispensation of grace?**

### **Baptisms Performed by Paul**

Paul performed water baptisms as recorded in Acts and in his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul spoke with Lydia, a Jewish merchant who was a worshipper of God. When she and those with her believed what he told them,<sup>13</sup> Paul baptized them (Acts 16:13-15). It is probably significant that there is no mention of a need for repentance, which is understandable because Paul did not preach the gospel of the kingdom. However, their baptism would have represented the washing away of sins. As noted previously, there is no record in Scripture that Lydia and her household received the gift of the Holy Spirit before or after their baptism.

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<sup>12</sup> Scripture does not say that Cornelius repented of his sins, but that repentance was *granted* to the Gentiles, referring to salvation from the penalty of sin (Acts 5:30-31).

<sup>13</sup> As he had done at Antioch, Paul most likely proved from Scripture that Jesus was the Son of God and Messiah and then told them of the grace of God (Acts 13:22-39).

After Paul cast a spirit of divination out of a slave girl in the Roman city of Philippi, he and Silas were beaten and put in prison (Acts 16:16-24). Despite their beatings and imprisonment, Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to God. A miraculous earthquake caused the prison doors to open and the chains that bound them to become unfastened. Instead of escaping the prison as might be expected, they reassured the jailer that they were still in their cells. By the grace of God, the jailer recognized that a miracle had occurred (he probably overheard their prayers and singing) and asked what to do to be saved. Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord with the jailer and those in his house, then he and all who believed in the Lord Jesus were baptized (Acts 16:25-34). As with Lydia, there is no mention of repentance, which would not have been appropriate because the jailer likely wasn't a Jew. Nor is there any mention of these new believers receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When Paul went to Corinth, he went to the Jewish synagogue first—as was his custom (Acts 17:1-3)—to reason with the Jews and show them from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah. As occurred elsewhere during his ministry, most of the Jews resisted his teaching and blasphemed God. However, Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and some others did believe what they heard and were baptized (Acts 18:1-8; I Corinthians 1:12-16). Again, there is no mention of repentance being involved or receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. As discussed earlier, however, at least some of the Corinthian brethren exhibited sign gifts.

In the account in Acts 19:1-7, we learn that twelve (or so) Ephesian disciples (believing Jews) had been baptized with the baptism of John. However, they had not received the gift of the Holy Spirit after their baptism and didn't know if there even was a Holy Spirit. Paul reminded them of the baptism of John, who told the people to believe in Jesus. Although Acts 19:5 is usually interpreted as saying that Paul rebaptized the Ephesian disciples, that verse is actually referring to the people who had heard the message of John as being baptized at that time.<sup>14</sup> Why would Paul baptize these disciples in the name of Jesus again? If he had, this would be the first and only reference in the Bible regarding rebaptism.<sup>15</sup> Instead, because Paul knew what these Ephesian disciples had heard and why they had been baptized, the disciples could recognize Paul's authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul consequently laid hands on them to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

### **Why Did Paul Baptize?**

We've seen that the purpose of water baptism began to change with Paul's baptism. So, why did Paul baptize some people? We must remember that Paul did not preach the gospel of the kingdom, which required baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Contrary to what Peter and the other disciples preached (Matthew 10:7; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:36-39; 3:18-36), Paul never told the Jews in the cities to which he traveled that their promised kingdom was at hand and that they needed to repent to receive it. When Paul spoke at the Jewish synagogues (Acts 17:1-3), he first reasoned with them that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah (*the Christ*) and Son of God, and that they were responsible for crucifying Him but that He subsequently was raised from the dead—all in accordance with prophetic Scriptures (Acts 13:23-37). Additionally, he revealed to them how we are no longer under the Law of

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 19:5 doesn't say that Paul baptized them; instead, it says that they were baptized. The original Greek manuscripts did not include punctuation, so translators added it where deemed appropriate. Some Bible versions have closed quotes after Acts 19:4, but they probably should be after verse 5.

<sup>15</sup> None of the believers in the upper room at Pentecost were rebaptized, nor were the brethren referred to in Acts 8:12-17 rebaptized by Peter and John.



Moses but under grace, which was entirely new and different than what Peter and the other disciples preached (Acts 13:38-39; 20:24). As discussed earlier, most of the Jews rejected Paul's message.

John the Baptist and the eleven disciples (later twelve with the addition of Mathias) were sent to preach the gospel of the kingdom and to baptize with water (John 1:33; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38). Paul, on the other hand, specifically said that *he was not sent to baptize* (I Corinthians 1:17). If this was the case, why did Paul baptize some people anyway? Although there is no recorded instance where Paul told people to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins, his baptisms still represented the ceremonial washing away of sins because that is what he understood from his own baptism (Acts 22:16).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, as with demonstrating the sign gifts from the Holy Spirit, conducting water baptism was a proof to the Jews of Paul's apostleship.

### **Did Paul Stop Baptizing?**

The risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ began revealing His message to Paul at his conversion on the road to Damascus and immediately afterward through Ananias. Initially, Paul found out that he was being sent to the Gentiles and that he was to suffer for the sake of Christ (Acts 9:15-16). This was only the first of many revelations to Paul from Christ (Galatians 1:11-17; Romans 16:25; I Corinthians 11:23-26; II Corinthians 12:1-7; Ephesians 3:1-11). Paul's message, referred to as the revelation of the mystery and the gospel of the grace of God, was centered on God's eternal purpose regarding the complete work of Christ at the cross (Ephesians 3:1-11; Colossians 1:25-27). During the course of these revelations, Christ gradually revealed His full message to Paul.<sup>17</sup> A careful review of the book of Acts and Paul's letters will demonstrate that the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins was never part of Christ's revelations to Paul. In fact, Paul said that he was not sent to baptize.

Paul did baptize some, however. Recall that the sign gifts of the Holy Spirit passed away—they were part of Paul's early ministry but were absent in the latter part of his ministry. As with baptism, they were proof of Paul's apostleship to the Jews. The Jews of Jerusalem and Judea had already rejected the ministry of Peter and the disciples, with the stoning of Stephen being the defining point of their rejection (Acts 7:51 – 8:1). After his salvation, Paul spoke to the Jews in their synagogues in the Gentile cities. He not only had a deep love for his kinsmen (fellow Jews) and desired that they be saved (Romans 9:1-5), but they may not have heard of Jesus or His crucifixion. As with the Jews of Jerusalem and Judea, however, their general reaction was rejection of the truth (Acts 13:44-48; 18:5-6; 28:25-28).

As we have seen, water baptism and miraculous signs went hand-in-hand. They were integral components of God's message to the nation of Israel. With God's setting aside of Israel during this dispensation of grace, the need for, and role of, water baptism and miraculous signs ended. Therefore, not only did Paul lose the gift of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated by his being unable to heal his coworkers, Paul stopped performing water baptism. Outside of his first letter to the Corinthians, which was written during the early part of his ministry, Paul did not mention water baptism or miraculous gifts

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<sup>16</sup> The forgiveness of our sins in this dispensation of grace is considered by God to be a washing, or cleansing; however, no water baptism is involved (I Corinthians 6:11; Titus 3:4-7; Ephesians 5:25-27).

<sup>17</sup> This gradual revelation is sometimes referred to as *progressive revelation*, just as Moses didn't receive the entire Law all at once, and the prophecies concerning Israel and the last days were not revealed all at once.

of the Holy Spirit in his letters. However, Paul did write about another baptism—a spiritual baptism—that was previously unknown.

## One Baptism

**There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.**  
(Ephesians 4:4-6)

In his letter to the Ephesian believers, which was written while in a Roman prison prior to his execution (Ephesians 3:1; II Timothy 4:6-8), Paul spoke of one baptism. What is that one baptism?

Remember that Paul referred to Israel as being baptized into Moses when they were in the wilderness after escaping Egypt (I Corinthians 10:1-4). That was not a physical baptism; instead, it referred to the nation's identification with Moses who was God's servant and prophet. The one baptism Paul referred to in his letter to the Ephesians also is a spiritual baptism; however, this one identifies all believers with Christ.

Remember, also, that John the Baptist foretold that *Christ would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit*—a baptism of power that would enable them to perform miracles (Matthew 3:11). Please note that *the baptizer is Christ*. This prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost, and it occurred *after* they had repented and had been water baptized for the remission of sins. Is this the same spiritual baptism we receive?

**For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.** (I Corinthians 12:12-13)

**For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** (Galatians 3:27-28)

Believers in this dispensation of grace are *baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ*, which is completely different than the baptism foretold by John and as demonstrated at Pentecost. Now, *the baptizer is the Holy Spirit*. What did Paul mean by being baptized into Christ? When does this occur?

Just as Israel was identified with Moses, we are completely identified with Christ. Our spiritual baptism identifies us with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection: His death is our death, His burial is our burial, and His resurrection is our resurrection. Furthermore, this baptism is completely performed by God through His Holy Spirit—there is no action on our part.

**Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in**

**order that our body of sin might be done away with [destroyed], so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. (Romans 6:3-7)**

**For in Him [*Christ*] all the fullness of Deity [Godhead] dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working [operation] of God, who raised Him from the dead. (Colossians 2:9-12)**

When does our baptism into Christ occur? At the very moment we believe the gospel of salvation, we are permanently sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, our baptism into Christ occurs at the moment of our salvation; in fact, this work of the Holy Spirit enables us to believe the gospel of salvation (II Thessalonians 2:13). There is no waiting for it, and no person can bestow it upon us.

**In Him [*Christ*], you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14).**

As discussed earlier, the word baptism means *to wash*. By believing the gospel of salvation, we are forgiven all of our sins—past, present, and future (Romans 3:21-26). In that sense our sins are washed away (I Corinthians 6:11), so our spiritual baptism into Christ is considered by God to be a washing of regeneration—we have been made a new creature, or creation (II Corinthians 5:17).

**But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)**

Unfortunately, denominational doctrine has instituted water baptism to symbolically represent our death, burial, and resurrection in Christ. Brethren, never was water baptism in the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) or the book of Acts ever said to represent Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. It was a physical baptism of repentance for the remission of sins and not a spiritual baptism into Christ. Our spiritual baptism into Christ, as revealed in the above passages, does not include any water or the actions of man—it is an operation of God through His Holy Spirit. If God had wanted us to symbolize our complete identification with Christ through the act of water baptism, He would have told us to do so, and Ephesians 4:5 would have said *two baptisms* instead of *one baptism*.

## **Water Baptism and Circumcision**

Many, if not most, Christian denominations consider water baptism to be an ordinance of God—they believe that it is something we must do to be obedient to God. Even when Paul was baptizing people, however, he told the Corinthian believers that he was thankful that he had baptized only a few of them (I Corinthians 1:10-17). He did this because the Corinthian brethren demonstrated their spiritual immaturity by creating factions among themselves by identifying themselves as being followers of either

Paul, or Apollos, or Peter, or Christ (they were bringing Christ down to the same level as men).<sup>18</sup> Although Paul's letters don't specifically tell us not to baptize with water, they do tell us there is one baptism, which is the same as saying that we shouldn't be conducting water baptism in this dispensation of grace.

Water baptism was an ordinance of God until Israel was set aside by God. There was another ordinance of God that the Galatian brethren were convinced that they needed to obey but that is contrary to the will of God in this dispensation of grace: circumcision. This example is discussed here because the Galatian brethren thought of circumcision in a similar way that Christians today think of water baptism.

Paul had established the Galatian brethren (in the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe) during three separate trips. He taught them the gospel of grace and fully explained to them that they (and all brethren in Christ) were no longer under the Law of Moses but under the grace of God. He told them that they were free from the yolk of bondage that the people of Israel had been under in trying to keep the Law (Galatians 3:10-14; 5:1; see also Acts 15:1-11). However, sometime after his third trip to them, false brethren had convinced them that they needed to return to the requirements of the Law of Moses to be obedient to God (Galatians 1:6-9; 2:3-4); specifically, they thought that they needed to be circumcised (Leviticus 12:1-3; Acts 15:1-2). Consequently, Paul was extremely upset with them, calling them foolish for doing so, and saying that they were severed from Christ in terms of their fellowship with Him (Galatians 3:1-5; 5:1-12). By doing these things, they were living as if they were being justified by works of the Law rather than through faith.

What, then, does water baptism have to do with circumcision? Both were ordinances that were required by God until they were set aside by God. Those Galatian brethren who thought they were being obedient to God by submitting to circumcision didn't understand that God didn't require His people to keep only part of the Law, but that He required them to keep the whole Law of Moses (Galatians 5:3). Water baptism was a requirement under the gospel of the kingdom, and the gospel of the kingdom included obedience to the Law of Moses (Matthew 23:1-3; 28:19-20). Therefore, believers who think water baptism is an ordinance of God that we should obey are under obligation to keep the whole Law, which can't be done because God nailed it to the cross with Christ (Colossians 2:13-14). Because God nailed the Law to the cross, *there are no ordinances during this dispensation of grace*<sup>19</sup>—we live by faith instead of by works (Ephesians 2:14-15).

### **Salvation Apart from Water Baptism**

Did water baptism save people? No; however, water baptism was a required part of the salvation process. The resurrected Lord Jesus confirmed this truth to His disciples before ascending into heaven.

**And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."**  
(Mark 16:15-16)

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<sup>18</sup> Brethren unknowingly continue to display the same problem today by identifying themselves according to the many different denominations.

<sup>19</sup> This does not include ordinances of God that describe His sovereignty or character (Romans 13:1-2).

From the beginning, God has saved His people by His grace through faith (Acts 15:11). However, with perhaps the only exception being Abraham, works were always required as a demonstration of faith prior to the message preached by Paul. That is, if a person didn't do (or at least humbly try to do) what God told him to do (either directly, or through His angels, His prophets, Jesus, or His disciples), then it was proof of lack of faith. Until the gospel of grace was revealed to Paul, therefore, salvation consisted of a combination of faith *plus* works.<sup>20</sup> Would Noah have been saved, both physically and spiritually, had he not obeyed God and built the ark? David knew in his heart that sacrifices didn't actually take away his sins (Psalm 32:1-2; Romans 4:6-8), but would he have been saved if he felt that obeying the Law of Moses and submitting to the required sacrifices was unnecessary? No, because disregarding the Law would have been proof of his unbelief. The same was true for water baptism. If a person had supposedly believed the gospel but decided it wasn't worthwhile or necessary to be baptized, then his lack of baptism would have proven his disbelief.<sup>21</sup> An exception to this was the thief on the cross, who believed that Jesus was the Christ and believed in His kingdom, but didn't have an opportunity to be baptized (Luke 23:39-43).

Jesus commanded His disciples to preach the gospel (good news), and Christians today are exhorted to preach the gospel as Jesus commanded. But what, exactly, was the gospel that the disciples were supposed to preach? In the gospel accounts and in early part of the book of Acts, the gospel was that *the kingdom of heaven was at hand*. In other words, Israel's long-promised kingdom, with Messiah as King, was imminent (Matthew 9:35; 10:7; 24:14; Mark 1:14-15; Acts 3:18-26; Jeremiah 23:5-6).

**Now in those days John the Baptist came, peaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:1-2)**

**Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)**

Brethren, there was no gospel of salvation, per se. The good news was that the prophecies regarding Israel's promised kingdom were about to be fulfilled. The people of Israel were to believe this and then undergo the baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins—forgiveness was good news but it was not presented as the gospel. However, there was more to faith than just believing in the coming kingdom. During John's baptisms, he spoke of the One who was to come, who was Jesus, the Christ (Messiah) of Israel (Matthew 3:11-12; John 1:19-41). Christ the Messiah, therefore, was the foundation (and author) of the kingdom gospel. Believing that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God was the center of the gospel preached in the gospel accounts and continued through Peter's experience with Cornelius in the book of Acts (Matthew 14:33; 16:13-17; John 1:14-15; 3:16, 36; 4:25-26; Acts 2:22-36; 10:34-43).

Consider the Apostle Peter's message to the Jews and Jewish proselytes at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36). There was no good news (gospel) of salvation in that message. Instead, he accused the people of Israel of killing Jesus, their prophesied Messiah. Peter went on to explain that God had raised Him from the dead and that He had ascended into heaven to the right hand of God. There was nothing about Jesus dying for their sins and that they were justified and made righteous through His resurrection. Several

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<sup>20</sup> We are spiritually related to Abraham, who was a child of God prior to being circumcised and prior to the Law of Moses, because he believed God and his faith was counted as righteousness (Romans 4:1-5; Galatians 3:6-9).

<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, submitting to water baptism without true faith was worthless (Acts 5:1-10; 8:9-24).

thousand people were personally convicted in their hearts for their responsibility in killing their Messiah, repented for doing so, and were water baptized by the apostles for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:37-39).

Not long afterward, Peter spoke to the people again (Acts 3:11-26). He, again, accused the people of their responsibility in the crucifixion and told them that they (as well as the nation) had to repent in order for God to fulfill His promise regarding Israel's prophesied kingdom. There was no gospel of salvation in that message, either. Later, when speaking to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43), Peter didn't tell Cornelius that Christ had died for his sins, only that people would receive forgiveness of sins by believing what Peter said about Jesus Christ—that He was the One spoken of by the prophets. Receiving the forgiveness of sins certainly was good news, but Christ's redemptive work at the cross was not part of Peter's message.

Why didn't Peter just tell the people what Christ accomplished for us at the cross? It is because he didn't know yet what had been accomplished. Only through the Apostle Paul was the gospel of salvation first revealed to us. In fact, Paul was the only apostle to speak of Christ's redemptive work on the cross as *the gospel of salvation*.

**Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.** (I Corinthians 15:1-4)

This *good news* about Christ's death at the cross (see also Ephesians 1:13-14) had been kept secret by God until it was revealed to Paul by our resurrected and glorified Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 16:25; I Corinthians 2:6-8; Ephesians 3:1-12; Colossians 1:25-27).<sup>22</sup> Through this gospel we learn that anyone who believes that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised again is saved by the grace of God apart from any works on our part (including water baptism, obedience to the Law of Moses, etc.). **Do you believe that Christ died for your sins?**

**For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Although by believing that Christ died for our sins is an admission that we are sinful and need salvation, repentance for remission of sins is not part of the gospel of salvation. When Paul spoke of repentance, it was to believers to encourage and exhort us to set aside our sinful ways and to live for Christ instead (II Corinthians 7:8-10; 12:19-21; II Timothy 2:24-25).

Additionally, among other things, we learn that upon believing this gospel revealed by Paul that we are glorified, justified, sanctified, reconciled to God, and made righteous in Christ—all according to the grace of God. Brethren, not all gospels are the same, so we must be diligent, relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern what gospel is being spoken of and to whom it is written, as we read Scripture (II Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17).

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<sup>22</sup> See the author's **The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)** about how and why God had kept Christ's work on the cross a secret.

## Conclusions

There are many reasons Christians are baptized with water today, some of which are as follows:

1. To follow Jesus in baptism
2. To be obedient to Jesus or God
3. To be a testimony to others
4. To symbolize our death, burial, and resurrection in Christ
5. For repentance and remission of sins
6. To become a member of God's family
7. To become a member of a denomination or of a specific church
8. To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit
9. To be saved, or to experience the fulness of salvation

Brethren, of these that are listed, only the second, fifth, and eighth reasons have a Scriptural basis. However, as discussed in this study, none of those three reasons apply in this dispensation of grace. But isn't water baptism a beautiful way to symbolize our identification with Jesus Christ? If God had wanted us to do this, then He would have instructed us to do so. By our making the decision that it is symbolic is adding to Scripture and making water baptism a work. Remember what Paul told the Galatian brethren about works for righteousness. There is only one baptism in this dispensation of grace, which is our spiritual baptism by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ.

What about those of us who have been water baptized? Truthfully, we were being disobedient to God and His written word. For those like me, however, we thought we were doing what was right. Please recall the passage about Apollos at the beginning of this study (Acts 18:24-26). Apollos was a man of God who was diligently teaching what he knew to be true. God used Priscilla and Aquila to explain to him the way of God *more accurately*. What they did was explain to Apollos the gospel of the grace of God that they had learned from Paul (Acts 18:1-3; Romans 16:3-5). Apollos took this to heart and became a coworker of Paul in his ministry to the Gentiles (I Corinthians 3:6; 4:6; Titus 3:13). If we have been baptized but now understand that it was not necessary or even desired by God, then we can move forward with a greater understanding of God's will—we can be even stronger in our daily walk for our Lord.

**For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. (Colossians 1:9-12)**

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