

# ***BAPTISM***

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*When and Why*

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# *BAPTISM – When and Why*

By David L. Miner

The question of baptism, and especially when and why to baptize, and most particularly what a local church policy should mandate as to when we should baptize new believers, has been raised by a leader in a local church. As a concerned believer involved for more than 42 years in some form of church leadership, I have been asked this question. This is, in part, a summary of what I believe Scripture has to say to this question.

The first thing I must say is that sincere and learned church leaders disagree on this issue, or more specifically, this question. This failure to agree leads me to conclude that Scripture is unclear. I believe that when God is unclear, especially on such an important issue as baptism, then he intends for us to decide the question. Since God can be quite clear in Scripture, and God *HAS BEEN* quite clear in Scripture many times, and then he *chose* to be unclear on this issue. Man has neither the insight nor the authority to mandate what God has chosen to leave obtuse. The passages that warn against taking away from Scripture also warn against adding to Scripture.

That said, let's take an overview of baptism in the Bible.

In the Old Testament there is no mandate to baptize or to be baptized. While there were a few times that baptism was recorded to have occurred, there is no teaching on the issue. Ritual cleansing was required by the Law for a number of sins and circumstances, and it is probable that over time this practice developed into baptism. And the more strict Jewish sects (such as Saducees, Essenes, and most Pharisees) required Gentiles to be baptized when converting to Judaism as a sign of repentance from worshiping false gods and embracing of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

***Many God fearers went on to become proselytes or fully accepted and integrated members of the Jewish community. This involved fulfilling the Jewish demands of circumcision (males) which related one to the covenant (see [Gal. 5:3](#)), baptism (males and females) which made one ritually clean, and an offering (males and females) in the Jerusalem Temple which atoned for sin. [Harold S. Songer, Holman Bible Dictionary.]***

In the New Testament, we see some significant changes in practice and theology.

First, we see John the Baptist baptizing. Each of the four Gospels mentions this, some in more detail than others. John would preach *repentance rather than sacrifice* as the means of dealing with sin, a substantial departure from traditional Judaism. As soon as the people saw the importance of repentance, and they agreed to repent, then John would herd them into the Jordan River and baptize them. Apparently, John was a man

of action and performed the deed almost immediately. While Scripture gives us no real teaching concerning this apparent urgency of his, Scripture gives us the clear example of John baptizing immediately after his preaching and their repentance.

*Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.* [Matthew 3:6, NIV]

We also have the clear example that John did not baptize everyone immediately. Some he chose to hold off until they demonstrated real repentance.

*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.* [Luke 3:8, NIV]

And some he refused to baptize at all.

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* [Matthew 3:7-8, NIV]

Scripture records the ministry of John but never really tells us much about it. And Scripture gives no explanation at all as to why John was baptizing, leaving us to assume the practice was derived from ceremonial cleansing in the Law. As a result, we can conclude why John was baptizing his converts. But since there was no real teaching in Scripture concerning how quickly he did or we should baptize after the individual repented, we should be cautious about drawing any conclusions.

*Developing a theology from an example is usually an unwise action.*

As Jesus developed and extended his ministry, he did not seem to share the same practice as John concerning baptism. While Jesus himself did submit to being baptized by John, Jesus did not seem to consistently baptize anyone or any group. Nor did his disciples. It seems clear that a few were baptized as a result of Christ's ministry; it is just as clear that baptism was not a mandate in his teachings or his ministry. In fact, baptism was not even an option during the bulk of his public ministry.

Further, and this is important, the reason Jesus gave John for his being baptized has absolutely nothing to do with why Believers should be baptized. Jesus stated it plainly.

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. [Matthew 3:15, NIV]

Since it is not possible for mankind "to fulfill all righteousness," we simply cannot use the baptism of Jesus as a mandate for Christians to be baptized.

However, it must have been an important issue because Jesus did include baptism in what we call the *Great Commission*. So let's take a closer look at that command by Jesus. We will look at the passage in Matthew since most biblical teachers and scholars suggest this is a more complete recording of Christ's command, as compared

to similar passages in Mark, Luke, and the Acts.

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*

[Matthew 28:18-20, NIV]

Please read this passage again. The command here was to *make disciples*. Part of making disciples included baptizing and teaching. But the command was to make disciples. Even Scofield admits that the King James translators should have rendered "teach" into "make disciples."

Baptizing, according to the words of Jesus in the *Great Commission*, was a function of **discipleship** and not a function of **evangelism**.

It is true that after the resurrection of Jesus the Apostles did baptize a lot of people. But we see no clear teaching that baptism was mandated for all new believers. In fact, we don't even have a clear pattern of the Apostles baptizing MOST of the time.

We, however, do have the example of the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to the coast road in Gaza, and this example has been used by pastors and teachers for 2,000 years to suggest or teach that baptism should be performed on all new believers. But these pastors and teachers have misunderstood this passage by the thousands over the years. The eunuch was *already* a believer long before he met Philip. In fact, he had just traveled about 300 miles from Egypt to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, and was on his way back to Egypt when he met Phillip. It was possibly years after the Eunuch became a believer that he was baptized. It was, however, immediately after learning about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that he was baptized.

This singular and unique situation is the Scripture most often quoted concerning the importance of baptism, especially on the *urgency* of baptism. Yet here baptism was not a function of the evangelist (Philip) endorsing immediate baptism; it was a request on the part of the eunuch. Scripture here does not teach that baptism should occur immediately after belief and conversion. Scripture in this passage doesn't even teach that baptism is important. Scripture *here* records that this man seemed to want to do anything that would please the God he had been serving for years. It appears that baptism was more important to the eunuch than it was to Phillip.

Even Paul, the Apostle appointed by God and sent by Jesus as the Apostle to the Church Age, was very short on teachings about baptism. Perhaps he explained this apparent lack of concern in one of his early letters to the churches.

*"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel..."* [I Corinthians 1:17, NIV]

In Romans, I Corinthians, and Ephesians, Paul spoke of baptism. But the baptism Paul

taught was the baptism into the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit at the time of salvation. Paul said almost nothing about water baptism.

In fact, the most detailed teaching on baptism in the entire New Testament encompassed most of the sixth chapter of the book of Romans. This passage speaks of the symbolic participation of believers in the death and resurrection of Jesus through baptism. But Paul does not once specify water baptism. The way Paul describes water baptism allows for it to be a totally symbolic act and nothing physical at all.

Again, things are not clear. And when God wants Scripture to be clear, he had no trouble doing so.

As a result, I can only conclude that baptism, while important, may be enacted in more than one manner and under more than one set of circumstances.

My personal belief of baptism in Scripture parallels what I believe the *Great Commission* commands.

I see baptism being two separate issues. The first being a spiritual act of baptism into the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit at the time of salvation. It is not a physical or volitional act on man's part – it is totally an act of God toward all believers. The second issue is water baptism as part of discipleship, performed some time during the process of being taught and disciplined by the Body of Christ. It is a physical and volitional act on man's part, and involves getting wet in the presence of witnesses.

***Water baptism is my declaration to the Body of Christ and the world in general that Jesus has begun a spiritual and supernatural work in me and I intend to see it through to completion someday in Heaven. It is important to all involved: God, the disciple, and the witnesses.***

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