

## WATER BAPTISM

It is tragic that an activity meant to unify those who believe in Christ has become yet another point of division. It is equally tragic that so many otherwise faithful Christians threaten their own salvation by resisting or ignoring the clear teaching of the Word of God and the consistent practice of the early church. It is not my intent in this issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now* to insist that baptism is essential or prerequisite to salvation because, as one of our local elders recently observed, the question of whether baptism is essential is the wrong question.

### Then

When one examines the New Testament and the writings of early church (pre-Constantine) leaders, there can be no doubt that water baptism was consistently practiced. In every conversion described in the book of Acts, the new believers were baptized:

- The crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost (2:37-41)
- Samaritans and Simon the Magician (8:9-13)
- The Ethiopian (8:26-39)
- Saul (Paul) 9:17-19; 22:12-15
- Gentiles at Caesarea (10:44-48)
- Lydia (16:14-15)
- The Philippians jailer (16:27-34)
- Crispus and other Corinthians (18:5-8)
- Ephesian believers (19:1-5)

Furthermore, water baptism was taught and practiced by the early church as a foundational doctrine. Paul taught about its significance (Romans 6 and Colossians 2), and Peter taught about its meaning (1 Peter 3). The Hebrew writer referred to baptism (washings) as an "elementary teaching" (Hebrews 6:1-2). Water baptism was not a debatable point—it was taught, accepted, and practiced.

*The Didache* (or *The Teaching of the Twelve*), a late-first or early-second century Christian document considered valuable by a number of church leaders, gives detailed instructions about water baptism. The writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (another early Christian document of the same period) clearly understood immersion: "*Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water; for, says He, they shall receive their reward in due time*" (Chapter XI).

Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology*, written in the middle of the second century, devoted a chapter to water baptism, saying: "*Since at our birth we were born without our own knowledge or choice, by our parents coming together, and were brought up in bad habits and wicked training; in order that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge, and may obtain in the water the remission of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over him who chooses to be born again, and has repented of his*

*sins, the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe; he who leads to the layer the person that is to be washed calling him by this name alone."*

What was important to the early church, however, was not whether water baptism was essential to salvation, but rather its significance.

**1. Water baptism washes away an individual's past sins.** On the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples attracted a large crowd, which Peter addressed. Many of the listeners were convicted by Peter's persuasive sermon and asked "What shall we do." Peter's simple, unequivocal response: *"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."* (See also Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5)

**2. Water baptism is the mechanism for becoming united with Jesus.** Paul's comments to the Roman church are foundational to the understanding of water baptism: *'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, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.'* (Romans 6:3-7)

**3. Water baptism unifies believers into one body through a common experience.** Paul explained this to the churches of Galatia: *"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."* (Galatians 3:26-29)  
And again to the contentious church in Corinth: *"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."* (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

**4. Water baptism is the mechanism for the regeneration of the individual (the new birth).** Jesus Himself said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"* (John 3:5). The term "born-again Christian" is, in fact, redundant. One cannot be saved, according to Jesus, without being born again.

**5. Water baptism is an individual's public pledge of faithfulness to God.** Peter expressed this clearly to his first letter to the churches of Asia: *"Corresponding to that [Noah and others being brought safely through water], baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 3:21).

**6. Water baptism brings with it the gift of the Holy Spirit and therefore a clearer understanding of spiritual things.** God is sovereign in all things, including the giving of the Holy Spirit—and there are biblical and ecclesiastical examples of individuals who received the Holy Spirit before water baptism. The early church, however, clearly understood that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit routinely

accompanied water baptism and was not some later event. The group of believers Paul found in Ephesus, who had received baptism but not the Holy Spirit had not yet received a Christian (in the name of Jesus) baptism. As soon as they did, they received the Holy Spirit.

In his *First Apology*, Justin Martyr explained the phenomenon of clearer vision: "*And this washing is called illumination, because they who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings. And in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Ghost, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus, he who is illuminated is washed.*"

**Nowhere in the documents of the early church is there any debate about the necessity of water baptism.** No where does anyone pick apart of words of Jesus in Mark 16:6 ("*He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.*"). No where does anyone cite the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43) as proof that baptism isn't essential. No where does anyone argue about whether water baptism is a work. No where is there any debate about whether being "born of water" (John 3:5) refers to water baptism or physical birth.

## Now

The entire argument about the necessity of baptism is a modern construct born out of the attempt to reduce the Gospel to a set of rules and regulations. Run a search on "water baptism" on Google or another search engine and you'll discover a dizzying cacophony of claims and counter-claims that represent the kind of argument that [Brian McLaren](#) calls "adventures in missing the point."

Trying to unlock some secret (or obvious) code in the New Testament that provides a prescription for salvation smacks of Gnosticism and legalism, both of which were resoundingly rejected by the early church. It is easy to get embroiled in the debate if one is passionate about the Gospel, but this kind of nit-picking does nothing to advance the cause of Christ.

The reductionist nature of the debate become clear when we are embroiled in controversies over the tiny Greek conjunction, *eis*, in Acts 2:38. Are we to be baptized **for** the remission of sins or **because of** the remission of sins? Here's an example of this kind of argument from [TruthSaves.org](#) (in blue) with a response (in black):

Let's look at yet another common verse used to defend this erroneous notion that the salvation of our souls requires water baptism. Here it is:

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

Obviously, the controversial phrase here is after the word "repent." We all agree that repentance is necessary for salvation. Let's look at the Greek word *eis* translated "for." In the original Greek, in the New Testament, this word has several different meanings. One is "aim or purpose." An example of *eis* being used in this manner is I Corinthians 2:7, which says "*No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for (the aim or purpose of) our glory before time began.*" I Corinthians 2:7 (NKJ)

In another usage, the Greek word *eis* means "at," or "because of" as in Matthew 12:41. Let's look at it: *"The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here."* Matthew 12:41 (NKJ)

Pointing out that a word can mean something else in another context certainly does not prove it carries that other meaning in this passage. More importantly, does God intend for us to determine correct doctrine on the basis of the translation of a single Greek conjunction? Arguing about the correct meaning of *eis* tragically misses the point.

Both of these uses are good Greek, and so the next logical question would be "What drives your choice of translation?" For me, it is the larger context of Scripture. For instance, in Acts 10, we see that people had already been saved before being baptized. Let's look: *"For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days."* Acts 10:46-48 (NKJ)

These people were speaking in tongues and had received the Holy Spirit yet they had not been baptized.

Before one looks at the "larger context of Scripture," one needs to look at the immediate context of the passage. Peter has just completed his sermon to the crowd that gathered after the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. He has accused the people of killing the blameless Son of God. They are "cut to the heart" (repentant) and ask what they can do (to be forgiven). If they were already forgiven at that moment, why does Peter tell them to "repent and be baptized." This crowd didn't have the opportunity to compare what Peter said to what occurred later in Acts 10.

How did the crowd respond that day? Did they say, "Let's wait and see what happens later so we can see if we really need to be baptized"? No, they just did it: "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

The incident in Acts 10 also represents a very special circumstance. Until that moment, the Apostles had been preaching only to Jews. God needed to clearly demonstrate to Peter His acceptance of Gentiles. Drawing conclusions based on exceptions is shaky theology.

Another example is the thief on the cross who went to Paradise without baptism. Let's read about that: *"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise' Luke 23:39-42 (NKJ)*

Clearly this man was never baptized.

Okay, the thief on the cross had a valid excuse for not being baptized. What's yours?

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I hope that demonstrates the purposelessness of these back and forth arguments. Nearly every argument has a counter-argument, which undoubtedly has a counter-counter-argument and so on. What possible value is any of this in bringing the Gospel to the world?

No legitimate Christian group denies that the early church practiced water baptism, nor does any claim that baptism itself produces salvation. That being the case, I have to wonder why anyone expends any time in this controversy at all. We don't decide who's saved—God does. Even incontrovertible proof of the necessity of baptism (if such a thing were possible) would not change that fact. God looks at our hearts, our words, and our behavior and knows if we have accepted His free offer of Grace.

So, "Is baptism essential for salvation?" is the wrong question. Few seem to ask "Is loving your neighbor essential for salvation?" or "Is hospitality essential for salvation?" or "Is charity essential for salvation?" or any number of similar questions related to Jesus' teachings.

As pointed out earlier, the early church believed that water baptism, through the Grace of God, accomplishes the following:

- Washes away past sins
- Unites us with Jesus
- Unites us with the body of Christ (the church)
- Regenerates us with a new life
- Commits us with a pledge of faithfulness
- Gives us greater spiritual understanding through the Holy Spirit

There are those who would argue one of more of these points, but **even if only one of them were true**, why would any believer refuse or neglect to be baptized? That's really the question!

As I said at the beginning of this article, it is tragic that baptism—clearly intended as a unifying event for Christians—has become a source of division. Other baptismal practices (such as John's) seem to be focused on the individual, but Christian baptism has a definite group function.

The Apostle Paul writes:

- ***all** of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death (Romans 6:3)*
- *by one Spirit we were **all** baptized into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13a)*
- ***all** of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:27)*
- *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were [**all**] 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)*

Each of these statements is directed to groups of believers, emphasizing their common experience in being united with Christ. To the ekklesia in Philippi, he wrote "*make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose*" (2:2). How can we be "intent on one purpose" when we argue about the very thing intended to unite us?

Water baptism should not be viewed as a law to be obeyed, but rather as an incomparable opportunity to be enjoyed. Those who minimize or even deny its importance are robbing believers of one of the most profoundly impactful experiences along the road to becoming more like Jesus. And those who legalistically insist that the unbaptized are unsaved miss the point.

I suspect that much of the debate comes back to a modern obsession with being able to fix a time and place that something occurred—to be able to say "I was saved when \_\_\_\_\_." But as I discussed in the earlier *ET&N* on [The Path of Life](#), becoming a Christian is not tied to any single event, it is a life-long process. Recognizing this makes everything we think, say, and do part of salvation in some sense. To the *ekklesia*, baptism was clearly part of that path—what they called *The Way*, but it was neither the beginning nor the end.

## Discussion

Surprisingly (to me anyway), there were few comments about the Water Baptism issue.

At least one subscriber agreed: *"I was afraid I was going to be in disagreement with some of your views in this article. I was wrong. You did a fantastic job of covering the subject, putting to rest some of the arguments against the significance of baptism, and placing baptism in its proper context. I agree with everything you said (surprise), and I will certainly use your article as a resource during some upcoming conversations on this subject. Thanks for such a strong and well-balanced article."*

Another subscriber comments on a part of the last paragraph: "I suspect that much of the debate comes back to a modern obsession with being able to fix a time and place that something occurred—to be able to say "I was saved when \_\_\_\_\_."

*"I suspect that God knows all about our need to know when we are saved and that is why we are told that we are freed from our sins when we obey the doctrine taught. We need to know that God has and will save us from our sins in order to have the hope that gives us power through the blood of Jesus to overcome sin and then serve righteousness. Romans 6:17-18 But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. [18] Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.*

*"The truth of the matter is; The whole world was set free from sin when our Lord died on the cross for our sins. But most of the world refuses to walk out of the prison even though the gates of hell are held wide open.*

*"I find it somewhat interesting that in John's day those who rejected the counsel of God did so by not being baptized. Luke 7:30 But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.*

*"Thank you for your thoughts on water baptism. "*



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Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now*? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

## NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Ephesus

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