



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Baptism

Going Public With the New Life Jesus Has Given You

The Short Answer

Baptism is a beautiful, public act of obedience in which a believer identifies with Jesus Christ and declares:

"I belong to Him."

Jesus commanded His followers to be baptized. The earliest Christians practiced baptism when people believed the gospel. And the picture baptism gives us is extraordinary: Going beneath the water pictures being buried with Christ. Rising from the water pictures being raised with Christ to walk in new life. But baptism does not purchase salvation. The water does not wash away our sin.

Jesus does. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ—not by performing a religious ceremony. That means baptism is not something we do so Jesus will save us. It is something we get to do because He has. For many Christians, baptism becomes one of the most meaningful milestones of their life with Jesus—a moment of obedience, surrender, celebration, public identification, and renewed awareness of the Holy Spirit already at work within them.

Read Romans 6:3–4.

Paul connects baptism with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

Baptism gives the believer a visible picture of an invisible reality:

The old life no longer has the final word.

A new life in Christ has begun.

Opening Memory Anchor

Baptism does not make us belong to Jesus. Baptism declares that we do.

PART ONE

BEGINNER GUIDE

1 START WITH JESUS

Read Matthew 28:18–20.

After His resurrection, Jesus gave His disciples what Christians often call the Great Commission. He told them to go and make disciples of all nations. And notice what appears immediately in that command: Baptize them. Then teach them to obey everything He commanded. Baptism was not invented centuries later by the church. Jesus Himself commanded it. The pattern is:

MAKE DISCIPLES

BAPTIZE THEM

TEACH THEM TO FOLLOW JESUS

Baptism therefore belongs naturally near the beginning of the Christian life. It is one of the first ways a believer can publicly obey Jesus.

Memory Anchor

Jesus did not command baptism as a way to earn salvation. He commanded baptism as part of following Him.

2 JESUS HIMSELF WAS BAPTIZED

Read Matthew 3:13–17.

One of the first things we discover about baptism in the New Testament is surprising: Jesus was baptized. John the Baptist was calling people to repentance, yet Jesus had no sin from which He needed to repent. John recognized that something unusual was happening. He even protested. But Jesus told him to proceed. Jesus' baptism was unique. He was not confessing personal sin. Instead, His baptism publicly marked the beginning of His ministry and demonstrated His willing identification with the Father's purposes.

Then something remarkable happened. The Son stood in the water. The Spirit descended like a dove. The Father spoke from heaven. The Father declared His pleasure in His beloved Son. Jesus' baptism therefore gives us a beautiful glimpse of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together. Our baptism is not identical to Jesus' baptism. But His willingness to be baptized immediately tells us something:

Baptism matters.

3 WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE BECOMES A CHRISTIAN?

Before understanding baptism, we need to remember what salvation is. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. We do not rescue ourselves. God saves.

Read Ephesians 2:8–9.

Salvation is by grace through faith.

Read Romans 10:9–13.

The sinner comes to Jesus in faith.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The person who is in Christ becomes a new creation.

Read Ephesians 1:13–14.

Those who hear the gospel and believe are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. That means baptism must never be presented as though Jesus did almost enough to save us and the water finishes the job. Jesus saves. His death paid for sin. His resurrection conquered death. Faith receives what grace provides.

Foundational Truth

We are not baptized in order to convince God to save us. We are baptized because we have trusted the Savior.

4 THEN WHY BE BAPTIZED?

Because Jesus commanded it. But that is not the only reason. Baptism is also a gift. It gives the believer an opportunity to express physically and publicly what God has done spiritually. Think about a wedding ring. A wedding ring does not create the marriage covenant. But the ring is not meaningless. It publicly communicates:

“I belong to someone.”

In an even deeper way, baptism declares:

“I belong to Jesus.”

No illustration captures everything baptism means, but this helps us understand why something can be symbolic without being trivial. Baptism matters precisely because the reality it points to matters so much.

Memory Anchor

Baptism is not empty symbolism. It is a visible declaration of a glorious reality.

5 BAPTISM PICTURES THE GOSPEL

Read Romans 6:1–4.

This is one of the most important passages for understanding baptism. Paul connects baptism with:

CHRIST'S DEATH

CHRIST'S BURIAL

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

and

OUR NEW LIFE IN HIM.

This is one reason believer's baptism by immersion provides such a powerful picture. The believer goes down into the water. Buried with Christ. Then the believer rises from the water. Raised to walk in newness of life. The water itself does not cause Jesus' death and resurrection to become effective for us. Instead, baptism visibly portrays our identification with the Christ who died and rose for us.

It says:

“My old life does not own me anymore.”

“My sin does not define me anymore.”

“My past does not have the final word.”

“I belong to the crucified and risen Jesus.”

“I have been given new life.”

6 BAPTISM AND THE OLD LIFE

Romans 6 goes even deeper. Paul is not merely talking about becoming a better version of ourselves. Christianity is not:

OLD ME + RELIGION.

It is new life in Christ.

Read Romans 6:6–11.

Our “old self” has been crucified with Christ. That does not mean Christians instantly become sinless. We still struggle. We still grow. We still need repentance. But sin is no longer our rightful master. Baptism gives us a powerful moment in which to say publicly:

“That old life is not where I belong anymore.”

This can make baptism deeply meaningful for someone who carries regret, shame, or a painful past. Baptism does not erase history. Jesus redeems people in the middle of real histories. Our past no longer gets to tell us who we ultimately are. Christ does.

7 LOOK AT THE PATTERN IN ACTS

The book of Acts records the earliest expansion of the Christian church. Again and again, something happens: People hear the gospel. People believe. People are baptized.

Read Acts 2:37–41.

Peter preached Jesus. The people were convicted. Those who received the message were baptized.

Read Acts 8:12.

Men and women believed the good news and were baptized.

Read Acts 16:29–34.

The Philippian jailer heard the word of the Lord and was baptized.

Read Acts 18:8.

Many Corinthians heard, believed, and were baptized. The New Testament repeatedly connects baptism closely with conversion. Not because baptism replaces faith. But because faith naturally begins producing obedience.

THE BASIC NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

HEAR THE GOSPEL



BELIEVE IN JESUS



BE BAPTIZED



CONTINUE FOLLOWING JESUS

8 MEET THE ETHIOPIAN OFFICIAL

Read Acts 8:26–40.

This is one of the most beautiful baptism stories in Scripture. An Ethiopian official was traveling home from Jerusalem. He was reading Isaiah. But he did not understand what he was reading. God sent Philip to meet him. Philip began with that passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled, they came to water. The man wanted to be baptized. They went down into the water.

Philip baptized him. Then the man continued on his way rejoicing. Notice the simplicity. He encountered the truth about Jesus. He responded. He was baptized. And he went on his way with joy. Baptism was not presented as a graduation ceremony for someone who had finally become spiritually mature. It belonged near the beginning of his journey with Jesus.

Memory Anchor

You do not need to know everything about following Jesus before you can obey the Jesus you already know.

9 BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

The clearest repeated pattern in the New Testament is that people hear the gospel, respond in faith, and are baptized. For that reason, many Christians—including the approach emphasized in this study—understand baptism primarily as:

BELIEVER'S BAPTISM.

That means baptism follows a person's own response of faith in Jesus. The believer is able to say:

"I have trusted Christ."

"I belong to Him."

"I want to follow Him."

"I want others to know."

Christians from several historic traditions baptize infants and understand the biblical evidence differently. We will examine that respectfully in Part Two. But for someone asking:

"What is the clearest straightforward pattern I repeatedly see in Acts?"

The answer is: People believe the gospel and are baptized.

10 WHY IMMERSION?

The word commonly translated "baptize" comes from the Greek word baptizō. The word can carry ideas such as dipping, immersing, washing, or overwhelming depending on context. Several New Testament baptism accounts also fit immersion naturally. Jesus comes up out of the water. The Ethiopian official and Philip go down into the water and come up from it. Romans 6 gives us the imagery of burial and resurrection.

For those reasons, this study presents full immersion as the clearest and most natural New Testament pattern. The person enters the water. The person is lowered beneath it. The person rises again. It is hard to miss the picture:

BURIAL.

RESURRECTION.

NEW LIFE.

At the same time, Christians who practice pouring or sprinkling should not be treated as though they therefore do not take Scripture seriously. Faithful Christians have reached different conclusions about the mode of baptism. Conviction and humility can coexist.

11 DOES BAPTISM SAVE US?

This is one of the most important questions in the study. The answer requires care. The New Testament speaks very strongly about baptism. But Scripture also makes unmistakably clear that salvation is God's gift received through faith—not something earned through religious works.

Read Ephesians 2:8–9.

Read Romans 3:21–28.

Read Titus 3:4–7.

Now consider the thief crucified beside Jesus.

Read Luke 23:39–43.

The man turned to Jesus in faith. Jesus promised him paradise. There was no opportunity for him to come down from the cross and be baptized. Yet Jesus saved him. That does not make baptism unimportant. It helps us distinguish:

THE BASIS OF SALVATION

from

THE RESPONSE OF OBEDIENCE.

Jesus is the basis of salvation. Baptism is a commanded response of the person who belongs to Him.

Important Distinction

Baptism does not save us instead of Jesus. Baptism points us to the Jesus who saves.

12 “BUT IF IT ISN'T REQUIRED FOR HEAVEN, WHY DOES IT MATTER?”

This question is understandable. But it can reveal a subtle way of thinking about the Christian life:

“What is the minimum I have to do?”

Jesus calls us into something much better than minimum Christianity. Obedience is not merely about meeting a requirement. Sometimes obedience is joy.

Read John 14:15.

Jesus connects love for Him with keeping His commands. Baptism gives a believer an extraordinary opportunity to say:

“Jesus, I trust You.”

“I belong to You.”

“I am not ashamed of You.”

“I want to follow You.”

Baptism is not the price of admission into heaven. It is a command wrapped in grace and celebrated with joy.

Memory Anchor

The better question is not:

“Do I have to?”

It is:

“Why wouldn't I want to obey the One who saved me?”

13 WHAT ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?

This is another place where Christians sometimes become confused. The Holy Spirit is not waiting outside the believer until water baptism occurs.

Read Ephesians 1:13.

Those who hear the gospel and believe are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

Read Romans 8:9.

Anyone who belongs to Christ has the Spirit of Christ. Acts gives us an especially important example.

Read Acts 10:34–48.

Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and his household. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon those who heard the message. Then Peter said they should be baptized. Notice the order:

THEY HEARD.

THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME UPON THEM.

THEN THEY WERE BAPTIZED.

So we should not teach that water baptism causes the Holy Spirit to begin living inside a Christian. But baptism can still become a profoundly spiritual moment. For many believers, baptism becomes a powerful milestone of: obedience, surrender, joy, public confession, renewed commitment, and awareness of the Holy Spirit already at work within them. Baptism does not make Jesus save us more.

It can mark a powerful new step in following the Jesus who has already saved us. Part Two will return to this subject and distinguish water baptism from what Scripture describes as baptism by or in the Holy Spirit.

14 “TAKING YOUR FAITH TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL”

Christians sometimes describe baptism this way. There is something beautiful behind that language. But we need to understand what it does—and does not—mean. Baptism does not move us from:

PARTIALLY SAVED

to

FULLY SAVED.

It does not move us from:

NO HOLY SPIRIT

to

HOLY SPIRIT.

It does not make God suddenly love us more. Instead, baptism may become a spiritual milestone in which the believer stops keeping faith merely private and takes a visible step of obedience. That step can: strengthen faith, deepen commitment, create a powerful memory to return to during future seasons of doubt, invite the church to celebrate and support the believer, and become a landmark in the story God is writing.

Years later, a Christian may look back and remember:

“I stood before others and confessed that I belong to Jesus.”

That matters.

15 BAPTISM IS PUBLIC

Christian faith is deeply personal. But it was never meant to remain merely private. Jesus calls people into a visible community. The church. When someone is baptized, other believers witness it. They rejoice. They remember their own baptism. They welcome another brother or sister. Baptism says both:

"I belong to Jesus."

and

"I am joining His people in following Him."

This is one reason baptism and participation in a healthy local church naturally belong together. The Christian life was never designed to be lived alone.

16 WHAT IF I AM AFRAID TO BE BAPTIZED IN FRONT OF PEOPLE?

You would not be the first. Some people dislike attention. Some fear speaking publicly. Some are uncomfortable in water. Some worry about what family members will think. Some simply feel nervous. None of that means your faith is weak. Talk with the church leaders conducting the baptism. Many churches can make the experience much less intimidating. You may only need to answer a few simple questions.

Sometimes another person can read your testimony. The important thing is not performing perfectly. The important thing is Jesus. Baptism is not a performance. It is a confession.

17 WHAT IF I WAS BAPTIZED AS A BABY?

This deserves gentleness. If you were baptized as an infant, your parents or church may have been acting sincerely from deeply held Christian convictions. Do not dishonor them simply because you later reach a different conclusion. But you may eventually become convinced that the clearest New Testament pattern is personal faith followed by baptism. If so, believer's baptism may become a meaningful act of obedience.

Some traditions would call that rebaptism. Others would say your infant baptism was the baptism and should not be repeated. Still others would say believer's baptism is your first biblical baptism because it follows your own profession of faith. Faithful Christians disagree. Part Two will explore why. If you are wrestling with this question, study Scripture carefully and talk with trustworthy leaders in a healthy church.

Do not make the decision from guilt or pressure. Make it from conviction.

18 HOW OLD SHOULD SOMEONE BE BEFORE BEING BAPTIZED?

The Bible does not give a specific minimum age for baptism. There is no verse that says:

"A child must be twelve."

or

"A person must reach a particular age of accountability before baptism."

For churches that practice believer's baptism, the more important question is:

Can this person personally understand and express genuine faith in Jesus?

A child does not need adult-level theology. But baptism should represent more than:

"My parents want me to do this."

"My friends are doing it."

"I want to get in the baptism pool."

A young person should be able, in an age-appropriate way, to understand truths such as: Jesus is the Savior. I need Him. I trust Him. I want to follow Him. Baptism shows that I belong to Jesus. Parents and church leaders should avoid both extremes: pressuring a child prematurely, or requiring a level of theological sophistication Scripture never demands. The goal is credible personal faith—not a particular birthday.

19 WHAT IF I WAS BAPTIZED BEFORE I REALLY BELIEVED?

Perhaps you were baptized because: your friends were doing it, your parents expected it, you wanted church approval, you were very young and did not understand, or you participated without actually trusting Christ. Later, you genuinely came to faith.

Should you be baptized now?

Many churches practicing believer's baptism would say yes.

Why?

Because baptism is intended to express personal faith in Christ. If the earlier event did not actually express your faith, believer's baptism now can become the confession the earlier ceremony could not honestly make. Again, this should not be driven by fear. It should be driven by truth and joyful obedience.

20 WHAT IF I HAVE ALREADY BEEN BAPTIZED AS A BELIEVER?

You do not need another baptism every time you: sin, rededicate your life, return after wandering, join another church, grow spiritually, or experience a powerful encounter with God. Baptism is not a spiritual reset button. If you genuinely trusted Christ and were baptized as a believer, the answer to later failure is normally:

REPENTANCE.

CONFESSION.

GRACE.

RESTORATION.

CONTINUED DISCIPLESHIP.

Not repeated baptism. Your baptism can actually become a reminder during those seasons:

"I belong to Jesus.

I confessed Him publicly. I am returning to the One who has never stopped being faithful."

21 WHAT IF I HAVE BEEN A CHRISTIAN FOR YEARS BUT NEVER GOT BAPTIZED?

Then there is no reason to be ashamed. But there may be a wonderful act of obedience still waiting for you. You do not need to pretend you were baptized. You do not need to explain away the past. You can simply say:

"I understand this now, and I want to follow Jesus."

Delayed obedience can become present obedience. The invitation remains.

22 WHAT DOES A BAPTISM SERVICE USUALLY LOOK LIKE?

Different churches handle baptism differently. But a typical believer's-baptism service may look something like this: Before the baptism, the believer may meet with a pastor or church leader to talk

about faith in Jesus and what baptism means. On the day of the baptism, the believer may: share a short testimony, answer a few questions about trusting Jesus, enter the water with a pastor or other church leader,

hear a brief statement about faith in Christ, be lowered beneath the water, be raised again, and pray or celebrate with the church afterward. Some churches baptize indoors. Others use lakes, rivers, pools, or outdoor baptism tanks. Some baptisms happen during a regular worship service. Others happen at a special gathering. The exact format is not what gives baptism meaning. Jesus does.

If you are being baptized, ask your church what to expect. There is no need to be embarrassed by practical questions about clothing, towels, testimony, where to stand, or what happens next. The church should be delighted to help you.

23 WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT SPIRITUALLY?

Do not put pressure on yourself to have a particular emotional experience. Some people cry. Some laugh. Some feel overwhelming peace. Some feel tremendous joy. Some are mostly nervous. Some come out of the water thinking:

“That happened quickly!”

Your emotions do not determine whether your obedience was real. At the same time, do not be afraid to expect baptism to matter. Pray beforehand. Ask God to deepen your gratitude for Jesus. Reflect on the gospel. Think about what it means to belong to Christ. Invite people who matter to you. Let the church celebrate. And remember the moment. Not because the water saved you. Because the Savior did.

24 THE BEAUTIFUL PICTURE

Imagine standing in the water. You have trusted Jesus. You know you cannot save yourself. You know He died for you. You believe He rose again. And now you are publicly saying:

“I belong to Him.”

You are lowered beneath the water. Buried with Christ. Then you rise. New life. It is a picture. But what a picture. The gospel acted out before your eyes.

Memory Anchor

Baptism says: Jesus died. Jesus rose. My old life no longer owns me. I belong to Him. I am walking forward with Jesus.

25 FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT BAPTISM

1 JESUS COMMANDS IT.

Baptism is part of Christian discipleship.

2 JESUS SAVES.

The water does not replace the cross.

3 BAPTISM DECLARES BELONGING.

It publicly identifies the believer with Christ.

4 BAPTISM PICTURES THE GOSPEL.

Death. Burial. Resurrection. New life.

5 BAPTISM IS WORTH CELEBRATING.

It is not merely something you have to do. It is something you get to do.

26 BEGINNER REVIEW

Complete each statement.

1 Baptism was commanded by _____.

Answer: Jesus.

2 We are saved by _____ through _____.

Answer: grace; faith.

3 Baptism pictures Jesus' death, _____, and resurrection.

Answer: burial.

4 The clearest repeated pattern in Acts is hearing the gospel, believing, and then being _____.

Answer: baptized.

5 Baptism does not cause the Holy Spirit to begin living in someone who already belongs to _____.

Answer: Christ.

6 Believer's baptism by _____ provides a particularly clear picture of burial and resurrection.

Answer: immersion.

7 Baptism is a public declaration that "I belong to _____."

Answer: Jesus.

8 Baptism does not make Jesus save us more. It is a joyful step of _____.

Answer: obedience.

Beginner Summary

Baptism is not something a believer does to earn salvation. Jesus already accomplished salvation through His death and resurrection. We receive that gift by grace through faith. But the Jesus who saves us also calls us to follow Him. And one of His clearest commands to new disciples is baptism. So baptism becomes something beautiful: Not:

“I am doing this so Jesus will accept me.”

But:

“Jesus has accepted me by grace.

I belong to Him. And I am delighted to say so.”

PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

27 WHAT DOES THE WORD “BAPTIZE” MEAN?

The Greek verb commonly translated “baptize” is baptizō. The word was used in contexts involving dipping, immersing, washing, or overwhelming. Its semantic range means we should avoid constructing the entire doctrine of baptism from a dictionary-style definition of one Greek word. Context matters. Still, immersion fits naturally with several New Testament descriptions and particularly well with Paul’s burial-and-resurrection imagery in Romans 6.

The linguistic evidence supports immersion. It does not, by itself, settle every historical debate about mode.

Intermediate Principle

Word studies can illuminate Scripture. They should not be made to carry more theological weight than context allows.

28 BAPTISM DID NOT BEGIN WITH CHRISTIANITY

Water already carried significant cleansing and purification imagery in Judaism. The Old Testament contains ritual washings connected with ceremonial purification. By the first century, Jewish purification practices involving water were familiar. Then John the Baptist appeared.

Read Mark 1:4–8.

John preached a baptism of repentance. But John himself said Someone greater was coming. Christian baptism therefore has background in earlier Jewish purification imagery, but it cannot simply be reduced to those practices. Something new had happened. Jesus had come. He had died. He had risen. Christian baptism would now be centered explicitly on Him.

29 JOHN’S BAPTISM AND CHRISTIAN BAPTISM ARE NOT IDENTICAL

Read Acts 19:1–7.

Paul encountered disciples who knew only John's baptism. He explained that John's baptism pointed forward to the One coming after him: Jesus. They were then baptized in connection with the Lord Jesus. This tells us that Christian baptism is not simply:

"I am sorry for my sins."

It is Christ-centered. Christian baptism declares:

"My hope is in Jesus Christ."

30 BAPTIZED INTO THE NAME

Read Matthew 28:19.

Jesus commanded baptism:

"in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Notice: NAME — singular. Father. Son. Holy Spirit. This passage became enormously important in Christian reflection on the Trinity. Baptism places the believer publicly under the name and lordship of the Triune God. It is not merely a statement about personal improvement. It is a declaration of allegiance and belonging.

31 WHY DOES ACTS SOMETIMES SAY "IN THE NAME OF JESUS"?

Read Acts 2:38.

Read Acts 8:16.

Read Acts 10:48.

Read Acts 19:5.

Acts frequently describes people being baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" or "in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Does this contradict Matthew 28:19?

Not necessarily. Many interpreters understand Acts to be emphasizing the identity and authority of Jesus rather than necessarily preserving the exact words spoken during every baptism. The converts were receiving Christian baptism centered on Jesus—not merely John's baptism or another washing. Most historic Christian traditions therefore baptize using the Trinitarian language of Matthew 28:19.

Some Christian groups prefer baptism explicitly "in Jesus' name." The texts should be allowed to make their respective emphases without manufacturing a contradiction.

32 WATER BAPTISM AND SPIRIT BAPTISM

The New Testament also uses baptism language for the work of the Holy Spirit.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:13.

Paul says believers were all baptized by or in one Spirit into one body. This is not describing someone being lowered into a pool of water. It describes the Holy Spirit incorporating believers into the body of Christ. This is often called:

SPIRIT BAPTISM

or

BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Many evangelical Christians understand Spirit baptism as occurring when a person comes to faith in Christ. The Spirit unites the believer with Christ and His body. Many Pentecostal and charismatic

Christians distinguish conversion from a later experience sometimes called baptism in the Holy Spirit, often associated with empowerment for ministry and spiritual gifts. These differences deserve careful study.

For this study, the important distinction is:

WATER BAPTISM

is the outward baptism performed by the church.

SPIRIT BAPTISM

describes the Holy Spirit's work in bringing believers into life and union with Christ and His people. The two should not be confused. For the earlier discussion of when believers receive and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, see Section 13.

33 DOES ACTS 2:38 TEACH THAT BAPTISM SAVES?

Read Acts 2:37–41 carefully.

Peter tells the crowd: Repent. Be baptized. He connects this response with forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians have debated the precise theological relationship among these elements. Some understand the verse sacramentally: baptism is a God-appointed means through which grace is given. Others understand repentance and faith as the saving response, with baptism so closely joined to conversion that Peter naturally speaks of them together.

We should not weaken Peter's language merely because it makes us uncomfortable. Baptism mattered profoundly in apostolic preaching. But neither should Acts 2:38 be isolated from the rest of Scripture. Acts itself later records Cornelius receiving the Holy Spirit before water baptism.

Read Acts 10:44–48.

The New Testament does not give us permission to turn baptism into a human work that completes an insufficient cross. A careful conclusion is: Repentance, faith, baptism, receiving the Spirit, forgiveness, and entrance into the Christian community are tightly connected in the New Testament conversion experience. But salvation rests in Christ.

34 WHAT ABOUT 1 PETER 3:21 — “BAPTISM ... SAVES YOU”?

Read 1 Peter 3:18–22.

This is one of the strongest baptism passages in the New Testament. Peter actually says that baptism “now saves you.” We should not pretend those words are absent. But Peter immediately explains what he does not mean. He is not talking about merely removing dirt from the body. The physical washing itself is not the point. He connects baptism with an appeal—or pledge, depending on translation and interpretation—of a good conscience toward God.

And the entire statement rests on: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians differ over precisely how sacramental Peter's language is. But everyone should notice where the saving power ultimately resides: Jesus Christ and His resurrection. Water without Christ saves no one.

35 WHAT ABOUT MARK 16:16?

Mark 16:16 says that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, while unbelief brings condemnation. This verse is sometimes used in debates about whether baptism is necessary for salvation. There is also a textual issue. The earliest and strongest ancient manuscript evidence for Mark does not include Mark 16:9–20, commonly called the Longer Ending of Mark. Most modern Bibles alert readers to this issue.

That does not mean the Longer Ending contains nothing historically Christian or biblically compatible. It means we should exercise caution about building a major doctrine primarily on a passage whose textual history is disputed. Even within Mark 16:16 itself, condemnation is specifically connected with unbelief. This passage should therefore be studied alongside the broader New Testament teaching about salvation and baptism.

Textual-Criticism Principle

A disputed textual passage should not carry a doctrine that cannot be established elsewhere.

36 WHAT ABOUT “BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD”?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:29.

Paul asks what those who are “baptized for the dead” will do if the dead are not raised. This is one of the most difficult baptism references in the New Testament. Christians and scholars have proposed numerous interpretations. Possibilities include: people being baptized on behalf of believers who had already died, new believers being baptized because the faithful witness of deceased Christians led them to faith,

a local Corinthian practice Paul mentions without endorsing, or another practice whose details are no longer fully recoverable. The verse is difficult partly because Paul refers to something his original readers apparently understood without stopping to explain it. Notice also that Paul refers to “they” rather than clearly identifying himself or the apostles with the practice. This verse receives particular attention today because The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints practices proxy baptism on behalf of deceased people and cites 1 Corinthians 15:29 in connection with that practice.

Historic Christian traditions generally have not understood Paul’s statement as establishing a Christian practice of proxy baptism for the dead. Most importantly, Paul does not teach elsewhere that someone can receive salvation through another person’s baptism after death. The surrounding chapter is about resurrection. Paul’s larger argument is essentially:

Why would people engage in practices connected with hope beyond death if the dead are never raised? We should therefore resist building a doctrine of baptism for deceased people from one unusually difficult verse.

Interpreting Difficult Passages

When Scripture gives us one obscure statement and many clearer passages, interpret the obscure passage cautiously rather than making it control the clearer ones. Do not ignore difficult verses. Do not force them to say more than they say. Study them in context. Compare Scripture with Scripture. And hold conclusions with appropriate humility when the text itself does not give us certainty.

37 WHAT ABOUT GALATIANS 3:27?

Read Galatians 3:26–29.

Paul says those who were baptized into Christ have “put on Christ.” Again, the New Testament often speaks of baptism more strongly than modern Christians sometimes do.

Why?

Because baptism and conversion were closely associated. Paul was writing in a world where professing faith in Jesus and being baptized were not normally separated by years of indecision. Baptism visibly marked identification with Christ and entrance into His people. We should therefore resist two opposite errors:

ERROR #1

Baptism replaces faith.

ERROR #2

Baptism is practically meaningless. Paul allows neither.

38 ROMANS 6: WATER BAPTISM OR SPIRITUAL UNION?

Christians have debated this question. Some understand Romans 6 primarily as describing water baptism. Others emphasize the deeper spiritual reality of union with Christ that baptism portrays. Still others believe Paul intentionally holds the sign and reality closely together because his original Christian audience would naturally associate conversion and baptism. Whatever position is taken, Paul’s central argument is clear:

Union with Christ means the believer cannot treat sin as though nothing has changed. Jesus died. Jesus rose. Those united with Him are called to walk in newness of life. Baptism therefore has ethical implications. It does not merely say:

“I once made a decision.”

It says:

“I belong to the risen Christ, and my life is now His.”

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS AND PRACTICE

39 SYMBOL, ORDINANCE, OR SACRAMENT?

Christians use these words differently. Baptist and many evangelical churches commonly call baptism an:

ORDINANCE.

The word emphasizes something Christ commanded His church to practice. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and several Reformed traditions commonly use the word:

SACRAMENT.

“Sacrament” generally refers to a sacred sign through which God works or communicates grace in a distinctive way.

The disagreement is not simply: One group believes baptism matters. The other does not. Nearly all historic Christian traditions believe baptism matters deeply. The disagreement concerns questions such as:

What does God do through baptism?

Who should receive it?

How does baptism relate to faith?

How does it relate to regeneration?

What promises are attached to it?

Does baptism primarily testify to grace already received, or is it also a means through which God gives grace?

Those are substantial theological differences. They deserve accurate representation rather than caricature.

40

WHAT DO DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS TEACH?

The descriptions below are broad summaries. Individual churches and theologians within each tradition may express particular details differently. When studying another Christian tradition, readers should verify its beliefs from that tradition's own official doctrinal sources whenever possible.

ROMAN CATHOLIC

Roman Catholic teaching understands baptism as a sacrament through which God grants regeneration, forgiveness, incorporation into Christ, and entrance into the church. Infants as well as converts may therefore be baptized.

EASTERN ORTHODOX

Orthodox Christianity also understands baptism sacramentally and connects it closely with new birth, union with Christ, forgiveness, and incorporation into the church. Infants are commonly baptized.

LUTHERAN

Lutherans generally teach that baptism is a means of grace through which God gives forgiveness and new life. They strongly emphasize that salvation remains God's gracious action rather than a human achievement. Infant baptism is practiced.

REFORMED / PRESBYTERIAN

Reformed and Presbyterian traditions generally understand baptism as a covenant sign and sacrament. Infants of believers may be baptized as members of the covenant community. These traditions generally distinguish baptism from an automatic guarantee that the baptized person is regenerate.

ANGLICAN

Anglican teaching historically treats baptism sacramentally and practices infant baptism, though Anglican churches contain a range of theological emphases concerning precisely how baptismal grace should be understood.

BAPTIST

Baptist churches generally practice believer's baptism by immersion. Baptism follows personal faith and ordinarily functions as a public ordinance declaring identification with Christ.

MANY EVANGELICAL NONDENOMINATIONAL CHURCHES Many evangelical churches similarly practice believer's baptism, usually by immersion, as a commanded public response to salvation already received through faith.

PENTECOSTAL / CHARISMATIC

Many Pentecostal churches practice believer's baptism by immersion while also teaching a distinct experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit associated with spiritual empowerment. These differences should be studied carefully and represented respectfully.

41 BELIEVER'S BAPTISM VS. INFANT BAPTISM

Two major Christian approaches are:

CREDOBAPTISM

from the idea of believing before baptism. This is commonly called believer's baptism. and

PAEDOBAPTISM

infant baptism. Believer's-baptism traditions emphasize the repeated New Testament pattern:

GOSPEL

↓

FAITH

↓

BAPTISM

They argue that baptism is appropriately given to someone who personally professes faith in Christ. Infant-baptism traditions often emphasize covenant continuity, household language, the relationship between circumcision and baptism, and the inclusion of believers' children within the covenant community. They may point especially to passages such as Colossians 2:11–12 and the household baptisms in Acts.

However, the New Testament never explicitly describes an infant being baptized. That absence is significant for believer's-baptism advocates. Paedobaptists respond that the New Testament also never explicitly commands Christian parents to exclude their children from the covenant sign. The disagreement therefore involves larger questions about covenant theology and the relationship between Israel and the church—not merely isolated baptism verses.

Our Emphasis In This Study

The clearest explicit New Testament pattern is personal response to the gospel followed by baptism. For that reason, this study leans toward believer's baptism. But Christians who practice infant baptism should be represented fairly rather than dismissed as ignoring Scripture.

42 WHAT ABOUT HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS?

Acts records several households being baptized. Examples include: Lydia's household — Acts 16:14–15 the Philippian jailer's household — Acts 16:25–34 Crispus and related Corinthian conversions — Acts 18:8 Some advocates of infant baptism argue that household baptism naturally could have included children or infants. Believer's-baptism advocates respond that the texts do not actually say infants were present.

In the jailer account, the word of the Lord is spoken to the household, and the household is associated with rejoicing in belief. Therefore:

HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS EXIST.

INFANT BAPTISM IS NOT EXPLICITLY DESCRIBED.

The text should not be forced to say more than it says.

43 WHAT ABOUT CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM?

Read Colossians 2:11–14.

Paul places circumcision language and baptism close together. Paedobaptist traditions often see significant covenant continuity here: circumcision marked entrance into the old covenant community; baptism marks entrance into the new covenant community. Credobaptist traditions generally respond that Paul is describing spiritual circumcision accomplished in Christ and emphasizes faith in the working of God.

This is a genuine interpretive disagreement. It cannot be settled simply by saying:

“Baptism replaces circumcision.”

The New Testament never states that sentence directly. Nor should the relationship between the two signs be ignored. The better approach is to examine the whole biblical covenant framework.

44 DOES THE MODE REALLY MATTER?

This study presents immersion as the clearest New Testament pattern. But should a Christian baptized by pouring or sprinkling automatically conclude:

“My baptism did not count”?

Not necessarily. Mode matters because biblical patterns matter. But the heart of baptism is not the exact quantity of water. Christians living in deserts, hospitals, prisons, areas of persecution, or situations involving disability may face circumstances where immersion is difficult or impossible. Historically, Christians have used more than one mode. So we can say:

IMMERSION IS THE CLEAREST PATTERN.

without saying:

GOD REJECTS EVERY BAPTISM PERFORMED DIFFERENTLY.

Conviction and humility can coexist.

45 WHAT DID THE EARLY CHURCH DO?

Historical sources outside the New Testament can help us understand how some early Christians practiced baptism. They do not carry the authority of Scripture. But they can provide useful historical context. One especially early Christian writing is known as the Didache, or “Teaching.” The Didache gives instructions about baptism. It directs Christians toward baptism in flowing or “living” water when available.

If that is unavailable, it permits other water. And when sufficient water is unavailable, it describes pouring water over the head. The Didache also mentions preparation for baptism, including fasting. That is historically interesting. It shows that very early Christians took baptism seriously while also recognizing practical circumstances. As Christianity developed, many churches also used periods of instruction before baptism.

People preparing for baptism came to be known as catechumens. This reflects how seriously baptism was associated with entrance into the visible Christian community. Historical practice does not settle every biblical debate. But it reminds us that baptism was never regarded as a casual church activity.

Historical Principle

Church history can help us understand how Christians practiced and interpreted Scripture. It does not replace Scripture as the final authority.

PASTORAL AND DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

46 WHAT ABOUT THE THIEF ON THE CROSS?

The thief is important, but we should use his story carefully. He demonstrates that Jesus can save someone who is not baptized. That strongly guards against the idea that water baptism is an absolute mechanical requirement for salvation. But the thief should not become an excuse for deliberate disobedience. He could not be baptized. Most of us can. There is a difference between:

“I cannot obey this command.”

and

“I simply do not want to.”

Grace does not make obedience irrelevant.

47 CAN SOMEONE BE SAVED AND REFUSE BAPTISM?

This question requires pastoral wisdom. A new believer may: not understand baptism, have been poorly taught, be afraid, come from another Christian tradition, have physical limitations, live under persecution, or need time to understand what Scripture teaches. We should not casually declare such a person unsaved. But persistent, informed refusal to obey Jesus should never be treated as spiritually insignificant.

The question eventually becomes larger than baptism:

“What does it mean to call Jesus Lord while deliberately refusing what I know He has commanded?”

Obedience does not purchase salvation. But genuine faith produces a growing desire to follow Christ.

48 DOES BAPTISM GUARANTEE SOMEONE IS A CHRISTIAN?

No. A person can enter water without trusting Jesus. Religious ceremonies cannot manufacture faith. A baptism certificate cannot save. A church membership record cannot save. A childhood memory cannot save. Christ saves. Baptism is meaningful because it expresses the reality of faith. Without that reality, getting wet is merely getting wet.

49 BAPTISM AND UNION WITH CHRIST

This is one of the deepest theological themes connected with baptism. The New Testament repeatedly speaks of believers being:

“in Christ.”

United with Him. His death counted as ours. His resurrection life becoming the source of our new life. Baptism dramatically portrays that union. This is why Paul’s baptism language can sound so powerful. Baptism is not merely:

“I agree with Christian ideas.”

It portrays:

“I have been joined to Christ.”

Christian identity is therefore not primarily: I improved. I became religious. I joined a club. It is: I belong to Jesus Christ.

50 BAPTISM AND THE TRINITY

Christian baptism is profoundly Trinitarian. The Father sends the Son. The Son accomplishes redemption. The Spirit applies Christ's saving work and indwells believers. Jesus commands baptism in the singular "name" of: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Baptism therefore places the believer's confession inside the identity of the Triune God. The Christian does not merely believe in generic spirituality.

We belong to: the Father who loved, the Son who came, and the Spirit who gives life.

51 BAPTISM, THE LORD'S SUPPER, AND THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Jesus gave His followers visible practices that continually point them back to the gospel. Baptism belongs near the beginning of visible Christian discipleship. The Lord's Supper continues throughout the Christian life. Baptism looks powerfully toward: our identification with Christ's death and resurrection, our entrance into visible discipleship, and our public confession of belonging to Him.

The Lord's Supper repeatedly calls the church to remember and proclaim Christ's death while awaiting His return. Christian traditions disagree over whether these practices should be called: ordinances, sacraments, or by other terms. But both direct the church away from self-reliance and back toward Jesus. Baptism says:

"I belong to Christ."

The Lord's Supper reminds the gathered church:

"Our life comes from Christ."

52 BAPTISM AND THE CHURCH

Read Acts 2:41–47.

Those who received Peter's message were baptized. Then they devoted themselves to: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. Baptism was not the end of discipleship. It was near the beginning. The newly baptized believer now learned to live as part of Christ's body.

53 BAPTISM AND PERSECUTION

In some cultures, baptism can carry a cost that Christians in safer environments may underestimate. Someone may privately express interest in Jesus without attracting much attention. But baptism makes allegiance visible. In some families or societies, baptism may lead to: rejection, loss of relationships, economic consequences, harassment, or persecution. This reminds us that baptism has never been merely decorative.

For some believers, stepping into the water is an extraordinarily courageous confession:

"Jesus is Lord."

Christians facing genuine danger should seek wise pastoral counsel and should never be pressured carelessly into unsafe publicity. But the courage of persecuted believers can help the rest of the church remember how serious—and how beautiful—baptism really is.

54 WHAT CHRISTIANS AGREE ON

Despite substantial differences, historic Christian traditions broadly agree on several important truths: Jesus commanded baptism. Baptism belongs to Christian discipleship. Baptism is connected with Christ. Baptism is connected with the church. Baptism should not be treated casually. Baptism points toward cleansing, new life, belonging, and identification with Christ. Christians should take baptism seriously.

55 WHERE CHRISTIANS DIFFER

Christians disagree about:

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

Believers only?

Believers and their infant children?

WHAT MODE SHOULD BE USED?

Immersion?

Pouring?

Sprinkling?

WHAT HAPPENS IN BAPTISM?

Is it primarily a public sign?

An ordinance?

A sacrament?

A means of grace?

HOW DOES BAPTISM RELATE TO REGENERATION?

Does new birth precede baptism?

Occur through baptism?

Is baptism ordinarily a means through which regeneration is given?

HOW DOES BAPTISM RELATE TO THE COVENANT?

How much continuity exists between circumcision and Christian baptism?

HOW SHOULD SPIRIT BAPTISM BE UNDERSTOOD?

Does it describe conversion?

A later empowering experience?

Different Christians answer differently.

SHOULD SOMEONE EVER BE REBAPTIZED?

Different traditions answer differently. These disagreements matter. But they should not cause Christians to misrepresent one another.

56 WHAT THIS STUDY CONCLUDES

After considering the New Testament evidence, this study emphasizes:

1 Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

2 Baptism does not earn salvation.

3 The Holy Spirit indwells those who belong to Christ.

4 Water baptism and Spirit baptism should not be confused.

5 Jesus commands His disciples to be baptized.

6 The clearest repeated New Testament pattern is faith followed by baptism.

7 Believer's baptism therefore appears to be the clearest biblical pattern.

8 Immersion most naturally portrays burial and resurrection and fits the New Testament descriptions well.

9 Baptism is not spiritually trivial simply because it does not earn salvation.

10 Baptism is a profound act of obedience, identification, confession, belonging, and celebration.

11 Difficult baptism passages should be interpreted carefully rather than ignored.

12 Christians who reach different conclusions should be treated with honesty, humility, and love.

57 A DIFFICULT QUESTION: IF BAPTISM DOESN'T SAVE, ARE WE MAKING IT TOO OPTIONAL?

That danger is real. Sometimes Christians correctly defend salvation by grace and then accidentally speak about baptism as though Jesus merely suggested it. He did not. He commanded it. The solution is not to make baptism a work required to earn salvation. The solution is to recover the biblical category of: JOYFUL OBEDIENCE.

We obey because we belong to Him. Grace does not make obedience unnecessary. Grace changes why we obey.

58 A DIFFICULT QUESTION: WHAT IF SOMEONE DIES BEFORE BEING BAPTIZED?

Our confidence rests in Jesus Christ—not in whether circumstances allowed someone to reach baptismal water. The thief on the cross gives us strong reason not to believe God loses someone He has genuinely saved because death prevented baptism. At the same time, someone who has the opportunity to follow Jesus in baptism should not use exceptional circumstances as an argument for ordinary disobedience.

59 A DIFFICULT QUESTION: SHOULD I GET BAPTIZED AGAIN BECAUSE I FEEL FAR FROM GOD?

Usually, no. If your earlier baptism genuinely followed faith in Christ, the New Testament response to later sin or wandering is repentance—not repeated baptism. Come home. Confess. Receive grace. Return to fellowship. Follow Jesus again. Your original baptism may actually serve as a powerful reminder:

“I declared that I belong to Him.
And I still do.”

60

A DIFFICULT QUESTION: WHAT IF MY CHURCH TEACHES SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM THIS STUDY?

Open your Bible. Study the passages. Listen carefully. Ask good questions. Speak respectfully with church leaders.

Read arguments from Christians who disagree with you.

Do not decide merely because:

“My denomination says so.”

“My parents did this.”

“A video convinced me.”

“Everyone at my church does it this way.”

The goal is not to win a baptism debate. The goal is to follow Jesus faithfully.

61

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING BAPTISM CAN NEVER DO

Baptism cannot replace Jesus. You could be baptized in every river on earth and still need a Savior. Water cannot bear your sin. Water was not crucified for you. Water did not rise from the dead. Jesus did. The power and beauty of baptism come entirely from the reality to which it points. Christ died. Christ was buried. Christ rose. Christ saves. And because He saves, His people joyfully step into the water and say: “I am His.”

Intermediate Memory Anchor

Baptism is not the gospel. Baptism beautifully displays the gospel.

FURTHER VERIFICATION AND STUDY

Scripture is the primary authority for this study. Readers who want to investigate the historical and denominational material further are encouraged to examine primary or official sources rather than relying only on summaries about what another Christian tradition believes. Helpful starting points include:

THE DIDACHE — CHAPTER 7

An early Christian writing containing instructions about baptism, including preference for “living” water and provision for pouring when sufficient water is unavailable. [THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH — BAPTISM](#) The Roman Catholic Church’s official explanation of baptism, including its teaching about regeneration, forgiveness, incorporation into Christ, and the church. [OFFICIAL LUTHERAN DOCTRINAL RESOURCES](#)

Representative Lutheran confessional and denominational resources explain baptism as a means of grace while maintaining salvation by God’s grace through faith. [OFFICIAL DENOMINATIONAL OR CONFESSIONAL SOURCES](#) When investigating Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed/Presbyterian, Baptist,

Pentecostal, or other Christian teaching about baptism, seek that tradition's own recognized doctrinal statements whenever possible.

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS — BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD Official Latter-day Saint materials explain the practice of proxy baptism for deceased people and connect the practice with passages including 1 Corinthians 15:29. These resources are recommended for verification and comparison. Their inclusion does not mean that this study endorses every theological conclusion contained in them.

Return continually to Scripture and examine every claim in light of God's Word.

THE MOST IMPORTANT INVITATION

Maybe you are reading a study about baptism and realizing that your real question is not:

"Should I be baptized?"

It is:

"Do I actually belong to Jesus?"

Start there. Christianity begins with Christ. Jesus lived the life we could not live. He died for sinners. He was buried. He rose again. He calls us to repent and believe the good news. You do not need to clean yourself up before coming to Him. You do not need to earn His attention. You do not need to become religious enough. Come to Jesus. Trust Him. Receive the grace you cannot earn.

Then follow Him. And when you step into the waters of baptism, you will not be saying:

"Look what I have done for God."

You will be saying:

"Look what Jesus has done for me."

ONE FAITHFUL SUMMARY

Baptism is a Jesus-commanded act in which a believer publicly identifies with Christ and His people. The New Testament most clearly and repeatedly shows people hearing the gospel, believing in Jesus, and then being baptized. Immersion provides a particularly powerful picture of burial and resurrection. Baptism does not earn salvation. It does not complete an insufficient cross. It does not make Jesus love us more.

It does not cause someone who already belongs to Christ to receive the Holy Spirit for the first time. But none of that makes baptism insignificant. Baptism is obedience. Baptism is confession. Baptism is identification. Baptism is celebration. Baptism is belonging. It is the believer standing before others and declaring: Jesus died. Jesus rose. Jesus saved me. My old life no longer owns me.

I belong to Him. And by His grace, I intend to follow Him.

Continue Studying

Read these passages slowly:

Matthew 3:13–17 Matthew 28:18–20 Acts 2:37–47 Acts 8:26–40 Acts 10:34–48 Acts 16:25–34 Acts 19:1–7 Romans 6:1–14 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 1 Corinthians 15:20–29 Galatians 3:26–29 Colossians 2:11–14 1 Peter 3:18–22 As you read, create three columns:

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

WHAT DOES THIS TEACH ABOUT BAPTISM?

WHAT SHOULD I BE CAREFUL NOT TO CLAIM BEYOND THE TEXT?

Then ask:

Who is being baptized?

What happened before baptism?

What happens afterward?

What does the passage connect baptism with?

Is the passage describing water baptism, the work of the Holy Spirit, or another use of baptism language?

Is the passage describing an event or giving a universal command?

What is explicit?

What is inferred?

Where might faithful Christians interpret the passage differently?

Most importantly:

What does this passage teach me about Jesus?

FINAL REFLECTION

If you have trusted Jesus but have never been baptized, perhaps the next step is wonderfully simple. Talk with a faithful church. Ask your questions. Study the Scriptures. Pray. And consider whether Jesus is inviting you to step into the water. Not because you need to make Him save you. Not because Christians earn heaven through obedience. Not because the water contains magic. But because you already belong to Him.

And sometimes one of the most beautiful things a believer can say is:

“Yes, Jesus.

I am Yours. And I am not ashamed for the world to know.”

Final Memory Anchor

Baptism is not something I do so Jesus will save me. It is something I get to do because He has.