

# Water Baptism

## Introduction

We consider Scripture to clearly highlight the command to be baptized. Instituted by Jesus himself<sup>1</sup> and administered in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit<sup>2</sup>, baptism is a sacred ceremony that celebrates the transforming reality of the gospel. We see baptism as an expression of obedience to be pursued by all believers in all places and throughout all times. The idea of an unbaptized follower of Christ in the times of the epistles would have been completely foreign. Lest we think that baptism was simply an ordinance that applies only to those who are Jewish or to those who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Scripture makes plain the universal call for believers to be baptized in the Great Commission<sup>3</sup> and in Peter commanding Gentiles to be baptized<sup>4</sup>.

Baptism signifies several things. It is a sign of cleansing and the remission of sins<sup>5</sup>. It signifies being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, serves as a picture of our identification with Christ, publicly announces our adoption into the family of God, and portrays one's pursuit of obedience to the Word of God and their willingness to humbly follow Christ's example<sup>6</sup>.

## Why Be Baptized?

Water baptism is not an empty ritual; it is packed with significance and meaning for each individual follower of Christ, the church, and our world in general. It provides a visible presentation of a spiritual reality that happens in the heart of a recipient of God's grace. In water baptism, believers are immersed<sup>7</sup> in water to identify with Christ's death and burial in their place for their sins<sup>8</sup>. Rising out of the water identifies one with the resurrection of Jesus for their salvation and going forward to live a God-glorifying life of obedience empowered by the Holy Spirit<sup>9</sup>.

In addition to providing a visible presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, baptism has a specific and helpful meaning for the local church. Just as we are given a last name upon our physical birth that identifies us with a specific family, baptism provides a means by which one can identify the *spiritual* family God has called them to. Where one is baptized provides some clarity as to who they are to be disciplined by<sup>10</sup>, which spiritual family they

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:22-26

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>4</sup> Acts 10:48

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 3:15-17

<sup>7</sup> Although churches carry out the ordinance of baptism in varying ways, ALAG believe the Scriptures teach us to baptize by immersion in water. The Greek word *baptizo* means to plunge, submerge, or immerse. Immersion in water also provides the best representation of a believer's identification with Christ's death and resurrection. Also, when looking at the context of the baptisms recorded in Scripture, they seem to suggest immersion in water as the prescribed model for us to follow.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 6:3-4

<sup>9</sup> Romans 6:4-5

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

are a part of, and who they are to be in mutual submission to<sup>11</sup>. A believer's baptism is an entrance into the family of God both universally and locally.

## Does Baptism Save You?

When considering the importance of baptism and the direction Scripture points us concerning this sacrament, this question is commonly asked. The view that water baptism is the means by which salvation is obtained is often referred to as "baptismal regeneration." This view assumes the Scriptures teach that the ceremony of baptism has a saving effect in and of itself. Those who hold to this view of baptism often point to 1 Peter 3:21, Acts 2:38, and Mark 16:16 as evidence of baptism's saving effect. This matter is extremely significant and has many implications<sup>12</sup>. We must consider what the New Testament teaches saves a person, and closely examine the texts mentioned above, before we arrive at such a position.

Looking at the New Testament, we see it is clearly taught that salvation comes by faith alone<sup>13</sup>. Both Acts 15 and Romans 4 are clear that no external act is necessary for salvation; it is one's faith in the finished work of Christ that brings them into the family of God and leads them to call upon the Lord for salvation<sup>14</sup>. If baptism were necessary for salvation, we would expect Scripture to be more consistent in its mentioning of baptism where the gospel is presented and explained, but this is not the case. Peter mentions baptism in his first sermon in the Book of Acts<sup>15</sup>, but makes no reference to it in a later sermon<sup>16</sup>. We also do not find Paul making any references to water baptism when he presents his most concise and clear presentation of the gospel<sup>17</sup>, and he makes a clear distinction between the gospel and baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:17<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, the Bible gives us examples of people who were saved before being baptized or apart from baptism<sup>19</sup>.

There are three specific texts that when given a cursory reading seem to teach baptismal regeneration. After examining the context, history, and structure of all three, we find they are doing no such thing. In 1 Peter, it seems the Apostle Peter understands his words<sup>20</sup> will be mishandled as soon as he writes them. This leads him to give clarity and understanding to what he is trying to say. He intentionally emphasizes that the act or work of baptism, immersing oneself in water, does not have any saving effect. Rather what baptism is representing, a calling on God through the work of Christ, is what saves. Peter is far from teaching baptismal regeneration here, but he does give us a fuller definition of water baptism that is both helpful and beautiful. Baptism is a symbolic act where a person is calling on God and appealing to Christ to rescue them from judgment, just as the ark rescued Noah and his family.

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<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 13:17; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

<sup>12</sup> Holding to the view of baptismal regeneration could encourage a person to have a false assurance of salvation.

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9

<sup>14</sup> Romans 10:9

<sup>15</sup> Acts 2:38

<sup>16</sup> Acts 3:19-20

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

<sup>18</sup> If baptism saves and is necessary for salvation, it would be unwise, unfruitful, and nonsensical for Paul to preach the gospel but to not baptize; no one would be saved.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 18:13-14; Matthew 9:2; Luke 7:37-50; Luke 23:39-43; Acts 10:44-48

<sup>20</sup> 1 Peter 3:21; especially referring to the phrase, "*baptism, which now saves you.*"

A verse that is often used to show that baptism is necessary for salvation, Mark 16:16, is actually showing the opposite to be true. The basis for condemnation here is not a failure to be baptized, but only a failure to believe. Baptism is mentioned because it was the outward symbol that accompanied the inward, saving belief.

Eager to know how they should respond to Peter's first public sermon<sup>21</sup>, the listeners are instructed to "repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins." It seems as if Peter is linking salvation and the forgiveness of sins with water baptism. To truly understand what Peter is doing in this text, and recognize why he is *not* teaching baptismal regeneration, it would be helpful to look at the account of a wealthy, young ruler who came to Jesus with an important question<sup>22</sup>. Roughly the same question Peter receives in Acts 2, this young man asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus instructs him to sell *all* he has and give the money to the poor. Are we then right to assume that *all* people must sell everything they own to inherit salvation? Of course not. Jesus is merely pointing out a barrier in the heart of this young man that is keeping him from humbly serving the Lord; his love for material possessions far outweighed his love for God. Peter is doing the same thing by mentioning baptism that Jesus did by mentioning the need for this man to sell all his possessions; He is pointing out a barrier to salvation that is present in their hearts. Peter is speaking to Jewish people in his sermon, and their biggest hindrance to conversion to Christ stemmed from their fear of persecution and being put out of their culture. Baptism was a public display of one's conversion to Christ, and Peter is instructing them that they cannot let their fear of the consequences keep them from obedience to and identification with Jesus. Following Christ is not something done in secret so you escape the uncomfortable conditions that may come from identifying with Him and His saving work.

No, baptism does not save you. By saying this, it does not lessen the importance of baptism or excuse a believer from being obedient to the Word of God by being baptized. Understanding these texts and what Scripture teaches concerning water baptism serves to safeguard us from having a false assurance of faith simply because one has been baptized in water.

### **When Should I Be Baptized?**

The Book of Acts chronicles the forward movement of the gospel and the formation of the early church. With that in mind, it makes sense that the book contains many examples of and references to believers being baptized<sup>23</sup>. When looking at the surrounding context of the baptisms in the Book of Acts, one can easily notice the immediacy, and what seems to be a sense of urgency, in the baptizing of those who were converted to Christ. Does this mean that baptism should be immediate after conversion? No. We believe it *can be*, but does not *need to be*. Even though the surrounding contexts show a sense of urgency, there is no explicit or direct command for immediate baptism in the New Testament. We believe baptism should occur as soon as can be conveniently arranged by the church and elders.

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<sup>21</sup> Acts 2:38

<sup>22</sup> Luke 18:18-23

<sup>23</sup> Acts 2:38, 8:13, 8:36-39, 9:18, 10:48, 16:33, 19:1-5