

# BAPTISM

SECOND EDITION

THE  
BELIEVER'S  
FIRST  
OBEDIENCE

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*Baptism: The Believer's First Obedience*  
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## PREFACE

**W**ater baptism for believers in Christ was instituted by our Lord. It has been the visible initiation ritual of the church for almost twenty centuries. Jesus commanded it; the apostles practiced it. But what does it mean? Many people are confused about baptism, wondering, “Why should I be baptized?” “Is baptism a requirement for salvation?” “How should baptism be practiced?” “Is it right to be rebaptized?” Such questions demand answers.

This book is designed to help those who are preparing to be baptized. It will also help those who want to understand baptism more fully. Specifically, it is an argument for *believer's* baptism rather than *pedobaptism*, or infant baptism.

Each of the first four chapters is designed to answer one of the central questions relating to the subject. Chapter 5 addresses theological questions and, in particular, answers those who assert that there is no salvation apart from water baptism. Chapter 6 looks at practical issues that arise in the practice of water baptism by immersion.

## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT IS BAPTISM?

**F**ive types of baptism are mentioned in the New Testament, though only two have to do with water. It is no wonder people become confused. When studying the scriptural teaching on baptism, it is important to stop at each occurrence of the word “baptism” and ask, “What kind of baptism is referred to in this text?” The five types of baptism are:

1. John the Baptizer’s water baptism
2. Christian water baptism
3. Jesus’s baptism (his suffering on the cross)
4. The baptism of believers with the Holy Spirit
5. The baptism of unbelievers with fire

### John the Baptizer’s Water Baptism

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming

for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Matt. 3:5–8)

John was known simply as “the Baptizer” (Matt. 3:1). He went as a prophet into the deserts of Judea and baptized people in the Jordan River, north of the Dead Sea. The Bible records that he baptized Jews as a sign of repentance for their sins. This repentance was spiritual preparation for the coming of the Messiah (or “Christ”). Jewish people were repenting of their sins and confessing faith in a Messiah who was about to come. The act of water baptism was the outward expression of their repentance and faith in John’s message. By demanding water baptism of the children of Abraham, who saw themselves as the holy people of God, John testified that, spiritually, they were no better than Gentiles. The meaning of water baptism was clear to the Jewish people throughout Israel who came to be baptized by John in the Jordan River.

This symbolic act demanded by John was centuries old. When visiting Jerusalem, in 1996, I personally witnessed archaeological evidence of these cleansing baths near the south entrance to the ancient Jewish temple. Excavated remains of cleansing baths, called *miqwaot*, are visible there today. Pious Jews would have visited these *miqwaot* on their way to the temple for worship.

Similar baths may be seen at Qumran, an archaeological site that in ancient times was the location of important Jewish religious activity.

Outward physical immersion expressed an inward spiritual repentance, in preparation for the Messiah's coming. But when the Pharisees and Sadducees came to John for baptism, he charged that their behavior did not demonstrate true repentance (Luke 3:7–8).

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The water baptism John practiced had purposes beyond the expression of individual repentance. It was the way God wanted John to manifest the Messiah to Israel. As John baptized the repentant Jews, he was looking for the Messiah. Although John knew Jesus as a human being, he did not know him to be the Christ until Jesus came for baptism—until he saw the confirming signs from God:

“And I did not recognize Him, but in order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.” And John bore witness saying, “I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. And I did not

recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’” (John 1:31–33)

## Christian Water Baptism

No one can be baptized with John’s baptism today. His baptism anticipated the coming of Christ and was only for the Jews. This was the baptism Jesus received; he was baptized in a Jewish rite of preparation for his own coming, not in Christian water baptism. Technically, therefore, we do not follow the Lord in water baptism. However, we obey the Lord by submitting to his command to be baptized.

Water baptism in Jesus’s name is distinct from John’s baptism. John 4:1b–2 records that Jesus instituted this practice during his earthly ministry: “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were).” Once the prophet John had declared Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus began to gather his own following. For a short time, both John and Jesus were at the Jordan River, making and baptizing disciples. John would make disciples and point them to Jesus, who would take them beyond John’s teaching. “After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there



He was spending time with them and baptizing. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and they were coming and were being baptized. For John had not yet been thrown into prison” (John 3:22–24).

The Pharisees tried to provoke John to jealousy and get him to criticize Jesus, but John’s answer surprised them. “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). John was perfectly happy to point others to the Savior rather than attempt to gain a following for himself. As people left John for Jesus, they were rebaptized in the name of Jesus to identify themselves as his followers. Jesus used the same rite of initiation that John had used. Once individuals had expressed faith in Jesus, they were immersed in water by one of his disciples (John 4:1–2).

An incident that took place in the city of Ephesus years later that is recorded in Acts 19:1–5. This incident helps distinguish John’s baptism from Christian baptism. While in that city, located in what is today western Turkey, Paul found Jewish disciples of John the Baptizer. Apparently, they had made a pilgrimage to Israel about twenty years before, during John’s ministry. At that time they had recognized his prophetic ministry and submitted to baptism in the Jordan. They had then returned home to await the Messiah but had never heard the news that the Christ had come. They did not understand that the Messiah had died, been resurrected, and ascended into

heaven. Neither did they know of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church.

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And it came about that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found some disciples, and he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:1–5)

John’s baptism was preparatory for Jews awaiting the coming of the Messiah. All those who were baptized in water by John had to be re-baptized when they identified with Jesus Christ as their Savior. This second kind of baptism is the Christian baptism we practice today.

## Jesus's Baptism of Suffering on the Cross

Jesus used baptism to refer figuratively to his suffering: “But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’” (Mark 10:38). Jesus called his upcoming crucifixion a “baptism,” because he viewed it as an immersion in suffering.

## The Baptism of Believers with the Holy Spirit

John predicted that the Messiah was the one who would baptize believers in or with the Holy Spirit: “And he was preaching, and saying, ‘After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit’” (Mark 1:7–8). After his resurrection, Jesus confirmed to his disciples John’s words of promise. “And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, ‘Which,’ He said, ‘you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’” (Acts 1:4–5).

The baptism of the Spirit followed just ten days after Jesus’s ascension to heaven from the Mount of Olives. At that time, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit into the believers. It was called the baptism of the Holy

Spirit because the believers were immersed by the Holy Spirit into the spiritual body of Christ, which is the church. The church was formed by the Holy Spirit's coming on the day of Pentecost. Thus, with this baptism, the church was begun, the Holy Spirit uniting all believers and placing them within the body of Christ. In the New Testament the baptism of the Spirit is mentioned frequently, but it is only once defined. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, the apostle Paul teaches that Spirit baptism is the possession of every believer: "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 Cor. 12:12–13).

## **The Baptism of Unbelievers with Fire**

Baptism is used figuratively in Scripture to refer to the coming judgment. As Luke 3:16–17 recounts, John predicted that his entire Jewish audience would experience the Messiah's baptism. Either they would believe the One who was coming and experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or they would reject him and experience the baptism of fire in judgment. While some have seen the baptism of fire as a reference to the Holy Spirit and to the tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost (Acts

2:3), the context of John's words imply judgment; he is condemning the unrepentant Pharisees. Fire speaks of the judgment that will fall upon those who do not bring forth the fruit of repentance. The vivid picture of judgment is that of the Messiah on a threshing floor, separating the wheat from the chaff and burning the chaff with fire.

And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matt. 3:10–12)

A respected reference work for pastors and laypeople, *The New Bible Dictionary*, agrees. It tells us that two Old Testament writers compared God's judgment to a stream of God's fiery breath (Isa. 30:27) or to a river of fire (Dan. 7:10).<sup>1</sup> Those who refused to repent and accept John's baptism would face a terrible future "baptism by immersion" in that river of fire when the Messiah came.

One issue remains: If the Bible says there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” in Ephesians 4:5, how can there be five? As far as the church of Jesus Christ is concerned, there is ultimately only one baptism that unites us spiritually into Jesus Christ and connects us to one another. That is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Water baptism is the outward picture of this inner spiritual baptism (1 Cor. 12:13).

## Summary

The New Testament speaks of five types of baptism. The first two are symbolic and use the medium of water: John’s baptism, which was a preparation for Christ’s appearance, and Christian water baptism, which is public identification with Christ. John’s baptism was only for Jewish people who lived during a certain period of time, but Christian baptism is for all those who believe in Jesus, regardless of their background or the time period in which they live. The third kind of baptism is Jesus’s suffering on the cross. Jesus himself performs the final two kinds of baptism: the baptism of believers with the Holy Spirit and the baptism of unbelievers with the fire of judgment at the end of the age. The baptisms that Jesus performs are in themselves effective, whereas Christian water baptism is not spiritually effective in producing salvation. Christian water baptism symbolizes baptism with the Spirit.