

Baptism: What Is It, and What Is Required to Receive It?

The issue of baptism for believers in Jesus Christ is an extremely serious one, for it is a means to receive the holy spirit, without which a person cannot receive eternal life.

“But you are not in the flesh but in the spirit, if indeed the spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ, he is not His” (Romans 8:9).

We are told in Acts 2:38 by the Apostle Peter at the first Pentecost, “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.” This prescription is outlined in Hebrews 6:1-2 as being an essential part of the foundation of what we might call conversion into the body of Christ, involving *repentance* [*metanoeo*, “to reconsider”; from *metamorphoo*, “to metamorphose, change”] from the errors of one’s previous sinful life, faith towards God, baptism, the laying on of hands, the resurrection from the dead, and eternal *judgment* [*krima*, “decide for or against anything”]. This is a process one is led to through the calling of our heavenly Father, to bring a person who is predestined to be a member of the elect to an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son (John 6:44; Ephesians 1:3-11; Romans 8:29). That relationship is termed a brotherhood with Jesus Christ being the firstborn of all of the saints, who will be raised as sons of God at the resurrection (Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 1:5; I Corinthians 15:51; I Thessalonians 4:15-17). We will be seated at the Father’s throne alongside Jesus Christ, and will not be

inferior to Him, but true brothers in the faith (Revelation 3:21)

Baptism — What It Means

As important as baptism is, we need to understand the meaning of the word. The word is used exclusively in the New Testament, and is found in 61 verses. In Greek the word is *baptizo*, meaning “to make overwhelmed, i.e. fully wet.” The word is a derivative to *bapto*, which means “to overwhelm, or cover wholly with a fluid.” It is obvious that in the context of the baptism of individuals for initiation into the ecclesia, the person is totally submerged in water, the reason that John the Baptist did his baptizing at Aenon near Salim, since there was much water there in the Jordan River.



Baptism also has metaphoric meanings, such as “... the answer of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (I Peter 3:21), Israel being “... baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the [Red] sea ...” (I Corinthians 10:2), and Jesus’ baptizing ... “with the holy spirit and fire ...” (Matthew 3:11). Jesus also indicated

in Matthew 20:22-23 that He was to endure a baptism of being thrust into the crucifixion by the Jews and Romans; see also Mark 10:38-30 and Luke 12:50.

So, baptism is the immersion into the body of Christ, the figurative washing away of one’s sins, removing them as far from oneself as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). That takes the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless life and was crucified for our sins so that we can figuratively be cleansed by the water of baptism to become a new creature, our sins forgiven, so that our body — the temple of God (I Corin-

thians 6:19) — can receive the spirit of God through the laying on of hands. That laying on of hands normally occurred immediately after baptism, once the person who is immersed emerges from his “watery grave” where his sins were buried.

It is likely that baptism originated from the priestly functions during holy day activities in the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, and at the temple of Solomon’s day. On the Day of Atonement, in particular, the high priest would perform his services in the morning and afternoon, and five times during the day he would go through a process of washing his hands and feet, removing his garments, totally immersing his body in a special golden bath, change his clothes, and wash his hands and feet a second time. (Numbers 19:1-10 and other places; Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, *The Feasts of the Lord*, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee, 1997, pages 121-122). As a new creature having God’s spirit, the person can then come into the presence of the heavenly Father cleansed of all sin and without blemish.

Instances of Baptism

There are several instances of baptism mentioned in the Gospels, Acts, and I Corinthians which will be discussed below. We must not forget the mission of “John the Baptizer,” who baptized many in the Jordan River with a baptism of repentance, in preparation for the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 3:11-12).

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!’.... Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6).

Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees also came to be baptized, but were called a “brood of vipers” by John, for they pretended to be righteous but in their works they denied their



Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, where there was “much water.”

Creator, and in Matthew 23 were utterly condemned for their hypocrisy and lawlessness. John was the baptizer of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:13-17).

1. Jesus Christ. At age 30 Jesus traveled to the Jordan River to be baptized by John (Matthew 3:13-17). At this age a person is mature to make wise decisions for his life, though this is not to say that people younger or older cannot be baptized. The Father calls whomever He will, whenever He wills.

2. The 3,000 at the first Pentecost (Acts 2:41). These people had heard the message of Peter,

“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).

These people had heard Peter speaking about how they had crucified Jesus, and they were “... cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). The 3,000 people had repented, were baptized, and received the gift of the holy spirit by the laying on of hands in short order, perhaps within a day of having heard Peter’s message.

3. Philip in Samaria. The disciples were scattered throughout Samaria and Judea after Saul (whose name was changed to Paul) began



The 3,000 that were baptized on the first Pentecost were most likely immersed in mikvehs, like the one unearthed above, which were common in Jerusalem at that time. Mikvehs arose during the intertestamental period and have been found in nearly every place where Jews lived, and were used for ritual purification.

persecuting them. Philip arrived at Samaria and preached Christ to the inhabitants.

“And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.... But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:6, 12).

Interestingly, the baptism itself did not bequeath the holy spirit to these people eager to follow this new way, but that occurred later when Peter and John, who had heard about the events in Samaria, traveled there from Jerusalem and laid hands on them who had been baptized. Simon the magician, who had captivated the people of Samaria for a long time with his *sorcery* [*mageuo*, “to practice magic”], also believed in Philip’s message and was baptized, but when he saw that the laying on of hands granted the power of God’s spirit he wanted to buy that power with money. Of course, that evil desire disqualified him from having hands laid on him

and receiving the spirit. Peter sternly told him,

“Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (Acts 8:20-22).

4. The Ethiopian eunuch. An Ethiopian eunuch, who was the treasurer to Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, was traveling along the road between Jerusalem and Gaza, reading from a parchment in Isaiah 53:7-8. Philip had been sent by the holy spirit to meet him on the road, and when Philip asked the eunuch if he understood what he was reading, the eunuch replied that he could not understand unless someone guided him (Acts 8:26-31). Invited into the chariot, Philip then expounded upon these scriptures concerning Jesus of Nazareth. When they came to some water, the eunuch asked if he could be baptized. Philip answered,

“‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he [the eunuch] answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:37).

At that point they stepped down from the chariot and Philip baptized him.

5. Cornelius and his household. Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian Regiment in Caesarea, a very devout and God-fearing man who helped the poor and prayed regularly. He also was a gentile. In a vision an angel told him to send men to Joppa to fetch Simon Peter at the house of Simon the tanner (Acts 10:1-9). Meanwhile, Peter in Joppa had the dream of a great sheet being let down to the earth, having all sorts of unclean animals, birds, and creeping things. The sheet was then taken up and let down twice more, each time a voice saying,

“Rise Peter, kill and eat. What God has cleansed you must not call common” (Acts 10:10-16). By the time the soldiers from Cornelius had met him and brought him to Caesarea Peter knew the meaning of the vision, for when he met Cornelius he said, “But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.... In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:28, 34-35).

While Peter explained the glory of Jesus Christ, and His greatness and crucifixion and resurrection, and that whomever believes in Him will receive remission of sins,

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the holy spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the holy spirit had been poured out on the gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God” (Acts 10:44-46).

These gentile Romans received the spirit of God *before* they were baptized, but as soon as they did Peter asked why they should not be baptized, those who had received the spirit? He then commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus (verse 48). The usual order of first being baptized and then having hands laid on was reversed.

6. Lydia and her household. At Philippi in Macedonia, Paul on the Sabbath day walked to a riverside locale where people often went to pray — likely a lovely, pastoral spot — and he sat down and spoke to some women there. Among them was Lydia, a seller of purple clothing from Thyatira, a devout woman whose heart God opened to Paul’s teachings. At that point she and her household were all baptized (Acts 16:9-15). That baptism occurred quickly, while they were there at the river.

7. The jailer and his household. While in Phi-

lippi, and some days after meeting Lydia and baptizing her and her household, Paul and Silas cast out a spirit of divination from a slave girl who had brought her masters much money through fortune-telling. When these men discovered she could no longer tell anyone’s, they dragged Paul and Silas to the city authorities, who were told how they were troubling the city, teaching strange customs. The distraught authorities then beat Paul and Silas with rods and threw them into prison, their feet fastened with stocks (Acts 16:16-24).

That night Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns, and about midnight a great earthquake shook the prison, and the prison doors were opened and all of the prisoners’ chains were loosened. With all of this commotion the prison keeper awoke and saw the prison doors open. Thinking all of the prisoners had escaped, he was about to fall on his sword and kill himself, but Paul called out and told him they were all safe, inside the prison walls. The keeper fell down trembling before Paul and Silas and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:25-30). Paul told him, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

The jailer then brought them to his house, where Paul and Silas taught them about Jesus, they were given food, and then they most likely journeyed to the river, perhaps where they had met Lydia and the other women, and were baptized.

8. The Corinthians. Paul left Athens and sailed to Corinth, where he was eventually joined by Silas and Timothy. He first tried to convict some Israelites of Jesus’ message, but was not without opposition, so he left them and entered the home of Justus, whose house was alongside the synagogue. In response to Paul’s teaching, Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in Jesus along with his household. They, as well as many Corinthians, heard the message and believed, and were baptized (Acts 18:1-8).

9. Paul the Apostle. Paul, having caused havoc among the believers in and around Jerusalem

and surrounding areas, encountered a bright light as Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, where he was told,

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 9:4-5).

Saul was blinded, and was instructed by Jesus to wait at a certain place for three days, during which he neither ate nor drank. He was finally told to meet Ananias, who laid hands on him, and immediately his blindness was healed ... whereupon he was baptized (Acts 9:6-18). At the same time as he was baptized he was filled with the holy spirit (Acts 9:17).

What Is Required for Baptism?

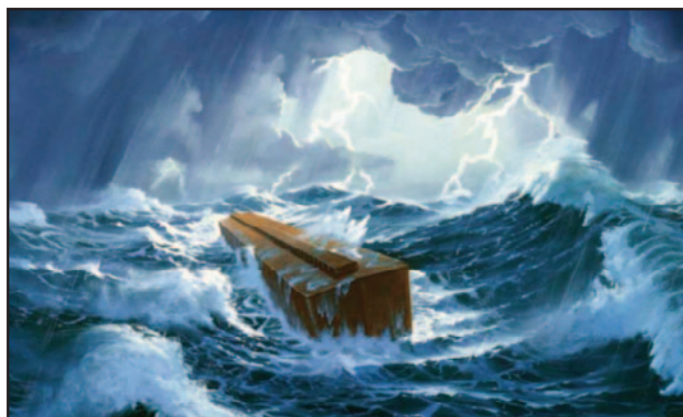
Looking at all of the instances that we have discussed, what is the common thread among them all?

- 1. A profession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.**
- 2. A willingness to bow to one’s Creator and follow His laws, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.**
- 3. An understanding that immersion in water is symbolic of washing oneself of all sins past, to arise a new creature; all things are made new** (II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Revelation 21:5). It is an initiation into the Body of Christ.
- 4. A commitment from that moment forward to serve the Living God with every fiber of one’s being, until death.**

These understandings are common to all of the examples of baptism in the scriptures, whether stated or not ... for not every word of each conversation has been recorded. Suffice it to say that the foundational principles of the salvation process are common to every person the Father calls, each one known from the foundation of the earth (Ephesians 1:3-6). These “elementary principles of Christ” are, as stated earlier, “... repentance from dead works,

and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:1-2).

We can be assured that repentance (changing) from past sins and faith or belief in God — that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God who lived a sinless life, was crucified, and raised from the dead on the third day — must first occur for any believer. Baptism usually comes next, followed by the laying on of hands to receive the spirit of God, but we have seen evidence that such a sequence can be reversed, as with Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44-48). Then follows the resurrection at the return of Jesus Christ when He returns to raise the saints at the Last Trumpet (I Corinthians 15:50-52; I Thessalonians 4:15-17; Matthew 24:30-31), after which comes “eternal judgment



The Deluge in Noah’s day was a type of baptism of the earth, the washing away of the filth of a sinful people whose minds dwelt continually on evil (Genesis 6:5).



Israel was figuratively baptized while crossing the Red Sea (I Corinthians 10:1-2).

[*krima*, “a decision, for or against’] which all of us will be making for eternity ...decisions that for us will always be lawful and upbuilding, even perhaps to the creation of worlds beyond this present one throughout the cosmos.

What about the patriarchs and prophets of old who had God’s spirit? Did they have to go through a baptismal process? Think of Abraham, David, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, Ezra, and the many others mentioned in Genesis through Malachi. Is there a record of baptism amongst any of them? Not a word.

We can therefore conclude that baptism is not essential to receive the holy spirit, but it is the prescription for the New Testament ecclesia. We need to follow the directives of Scripture, and baptism is certainly a major part of the requirement to obey our Creator.

The spirit of the living God must be *within* us or we are none of His (Romans 8:9), but this is not saying the spirit of God has not been *with* us, perhaps even since conception ... for we read in John 14:17,,

“... the spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees it nor knows it; but you know it, for *it dwells with you and will be in you*” (John 14:17; I have substituted “it” for “Him” in the NKJV to show that this spirit is the power of God, not a spirit personage).

The spirit had to be prepared for those whom the Father had destined from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), then accompanied us from conception until our time of choosing (John 6:44), and finally placed within us at baptism and the laying on of hands (Acts 2:38; Hebrews 6:1-2). We know that Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5) and Isaiah (Isaiah 49:1, 5) were known from the womb to be God’s servants. Why not all of us as well?

Let’s face it: the Eternal God can place His spirit within one of His people at any time and in any way He desires. He is God. His plan is immutable.

Some people might say that there needs to be some sort of “counseling” for the believer in Christ before baptism. Some look to Luke 14:28-29 which states,

“But which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it — lest after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him?”

There is a principle here that when you begin a project you need to be sure you have sufficient funds or power to complete it. This can apply to baptism: the believer must be assured that he or she will carry on allegiance to the God who called and chose him to the end of one’s days. This is a given; we must all have that attitude. Yet, we cannot know the future, and do not see the many trials and sufferings we will have to endure before the end of our lives, or the return of Christ if we are living when He comes again. “But he that endures to the end shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). That also is a given, and we must have the faith that the Eternal will carry us through each trial and never fail us, for He said,

“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (I Corinthians 10:13).

Let us take our Creator at His word. He said, “... lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). And again, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved ...” (Mark 16:16). That belief, as we have seen here, involves much, much more than a simple “sinner’s prayer.” Let us follow the Eternal’s directions, for they are Life and Hope for us all!

What About the Cost?

Paul W. Syltje — April 14, 2020