

WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW VOLUME II (#WCSK2) PART III: BAPTISM

The series What Christians Should Know Volume II (#WCSK2) provides Biblical instruction on everyday practices and basic concepts of the Christian faith. All Scriptures will be taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted. Biblical references are examples and are in no way intended to be exhaustive. Many of the ideas here will build upon the series [What Christians Should Know Volume I](#) (#WCSK), which provides education on core beliefs and doctrines in the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Psalm 119:105

Introduction

In the Great Commission, Jesus says the following:

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (emphasis added; Matthew 28:18-20).

In other words, after Jesus rises from the dead and before He ascends into Heaven, He instructs His disciples (and by implication, all of us) to go out into the world to spread the Word of God. As a part of this commandment, Jesus also commands His disciples to baptize those in “*all* the nations” as well. This is a pretty inclusive and hefty command, so it is clear that baptism plays an important part in the Christian faith and the modern believer’s life. The question then becomes, what exactly is baptism, why is it so important, and what does it mean exactly? I will answer all of these basic questions in this lesson, but the reader should note that there is some debate in contemporary Christianity about the peculiarities of baptism. Here, I will start with the fundamental doctrine behind baptism and very briefly touch upon infant baptism at the end. My goal here is to make sure you understand the underlying principle, which Biblically is always more important than the resultant methods.

The Principle

What baptism is. The English word baptism derives from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means “to immerse, submerge, to make fully wet.” *Baptizo* is a derivative of the word *bapto*, which means to whelm or to cover wholly with fluid; of course, baptism is always performed in water.¹ In the Old Testament, washing in water was linked with religious and moral purity.²

Baptism is an outward sign of a believer’s inward union with Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection.³

Baptism is a symbol of a new [covenant](#), and whenever God enters into a covenant with His people, He always substantiates His promises with a sign (e.g., a rainbow in the case of Noah and his family after the flood as a promise from God never to destroy the world by water ever again).

As with any other covenantal sign, *it is a witness to something else* that is not itself.

Accordingly, what circumcision was for the old covenant is what baptism is for the new.⁴ Baptism as a formal practice actually began before the Great Commission with John the Baptizer.^{5, 6, 7}

In Romans 6:3–4, the apostle Paul writes, “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” In Colossians 2:12, Paul also writes, “having been buried with [Jesus] in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” Hence, as Wayne Grudem writes, “Baptism thus very clearly pictures death to one’s old way of life and rising to a new kind of life in Christ.”⁸

¹ Mark 1:5, 10; Luke 4:16–22; John 3:23; Acts 8:36–39

² Isaiah 1:16–1; Jeremiah 4:14; Ezekiel 36:25

³ Romans 8:29

⁴ Colossians 2:9–15

⁵ Luke 3:1–6

⁶ It is worth mentioning that John’s baptism, technically speaking, was not equivalent to the baptism commanded by Christ. The former served as a rite of preparation and cleansing from sin for Jews, and therefore was grounded in the Old Testament, who awaited the arrival of the Messiah. New Testament baptism had much greater significance, was universal, and was commanded by Jesus, Who now had “All authority on heaven and earth” as a result of His finished work on the Cross. This new sign signifies everything God gives to us and thus represents a new covenant that was impossible before the resurrection in John’s time.

⁷ There are also allusions to baptism in the Old Testament. For example, see II Kings 5.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 969.

Baptism, being an external and visible sign, points directly to an internal and invisible change. So we go down into the water, are “immersed or submerged” and then literally arise and symbolically arise like Christ, being made dirt free by the purifying water.

This cleansing figuratively washes us of our sins. The only exception to this is the baptism of Jesus, Who was sinless. His baptism was understood as Him being commissioned as the harbinger of God’s kingdom.⁹ Titus 3:4–6 says:

“But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, *by the washing of regeneration* and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (emphasis added).

R. C. Sproul writes, “Baptism is a sign of God’s promise to regenerate His people, to liberate them from moral bondage of original sin, to cleanse their souls from guilt and purify them so that they can enter into a saving relationship with Him. So all of what happens in the Holy Spirit’s work of changing us from the inside out is signified by the sacrament of baptism. It is a sign of cleansing from sin, which is regeneration to new life in Christ.”¹⁰

Water baptism is also a sign of spiritual baptism, or the anointing of the Holy Spirit of all believers.¹¹ This anointing subsequently empowers believers¹² to participate in the [Church](#): the body of Christ.

In the following verses, I add italics for emphasis. In Acts 22:16, Ananias tells Saul, “Get up and be baptized, and *wash away your sins*, calling on His name.”

“Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

“Such were some of you; *but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6:11).

[Regeneration](#), the forgiveness of sins, justification, and sanctification are all invisible and internal events. Faith is invisible. Grace is invisible. Love is invisible. All the cornerstones of the Christian faith are invisible, yet very real aspects of our relationship with God. So, while baptism is important, the fact remains that *it is still an act* that happens in the natural, fleshly realm. The key point is to recognize that baptism points to something greater—something spiritual—on the inside that is unseen. In Galatians 3:27,

⁹ Mark 1:10–11; c.f. Isaiah 42:1–9

¹⁰ R. C. Sproul, *What is Baptism?* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2012) Loc 254, Kindle.

¹¹ Acts 2:2–4, 16–17, 8:14–17, 10:44, 19:1–6; c.f. Joel 2:28–29

¹² I Corinthians 12:7

Paul makes it clear that baptism is an external symbol of internal regeneration: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

A modern corollary would be marriage. A wedding is a visible, public act that is a one-time event that signifies the start of a marriage. Oftentimes, the couple also shares visible signs (wedding rings) to commemorate the marriage. Yet it is *the marriage itself*, not the wedding or the rings, that is a deep, intimate relationship between two people becoming one and beginning a new life together as an inseparable union. The ceremonial event points to a lifelong marriage, and a wedding means nothing without a subsequent marriage. In fact, a couple can have a very loving and fruitful marriage without a wedding and without rings. What matters the most is that the two people know, understand, and love each other, and as a result, have an appreciation for the ceremony and what it truly means.

The ceremony has no automatic effectiveness. A couple could have the biggest wedding imaginable and still have a horrible marriage. Similarly, a person can get baptized on Sunday and then commit every sin possible on Monday. In other words, because baptism is a sign instituted by God, Who is [sovereign](#), the reliability of the sign is *independent* of the individual who receives it and who performs it.

Why baptism? Baptism is so vitally important, *not* because you’re being dunked in water. Baptism is important because it is a public declaration that you are now entering into a new, lifelong relationship with Christ and as a result, you have buried your old way of life and have risen anew with Jesus.

So the short answer to the question, “Why should I get baptized?” is quite simple: so that you can enter into a new, righteous life with Christ.¹³

Furthermore, even though the sign points to something greater, the sign is not formless and void. It is something that Jesus commanded and this sign is something we and those around us can perceive with our own senses that communicates God’s promise of salvation by faith. Subsequent to baptism, anyone can look back and remember that this sign is backed up by a trustworthy and living God, Who never fails to deliver on His promises.

Additionally, as Jesus commanded, one is always baptized *in the name of* “the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The value of the baptism itself is rooted in how the baptism is qualified. Baptism in the name of a person, church, or idea is a worthless baptism. However, baptism in the name of the [Trinity](#) points directly to the fact that we are walking through waters of purification and stepping out on the other side free from old bondage and liberated to live for God by the Holy Spirit working in our lives, Who turns us to Christ, and Who reconciles us back to the Father. Baptism signals our new way of life, and our new way of life is possible because of the Trinity.

¹³ John 3:3–5; Colossians 2:11–12

This leads to an important question: *Does salvation require baptism?* The short answer is no, but the better answer is that there is no good reason why a believer shouldn't be baptized.

Jesus told the thief crucified next to Him (who wasn't baptized), "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise".¹⁴ Taking Jesus seriously means living a life of obedience, and a person obedient to Christ thus wants to follow His command to get baptized.

The long answer to "Does salvation require baptism?" is that again, baptism is an act that human beings execute and therefore is a type of "work." And, we know from [*What Christians Should Know Volume I*](#) that one of the core teachings of the Bible is that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone.¹⁵ Because salvation is a free gift from God,¹⁶ we can't rely on things we do to earn our salvation.¹⁷ It is [*by faith that we are saved*](#), not baptism (or any other work), which is the instrumental cause of our justification, or the removal of our sins and being declared righteous before God through Christ. The Roman Catholic Church, in contrast, teaches that *by baptism*, a person is justified. Using that logic, if in fact baptism was required for salvation, one could theoretically baptize Satanists and presumably "get them into heaven" by checking a box on their salvation cards.

In addition, baptism does not cause regeneration or the removal of sins—only God does that. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the outward sign of belonging to the covenant community, but true circumcision is something inward and spiritual.¹⁸ In fact, Paul writes that not all those who belonged to the Old Testament covenant community (Israel) belonged to Israel.¹⁹ Paul discusses the parallel between circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:11–12:

"And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Now, there are some verses that seem to suggest that baptism *is* required for salvation,²⁰ but scrutiny of the text tells a different story. For example, in Titus 3:5,²¹ the text refers to a "washing of regeneration," but no one can pick up a liter bottle of regeneration

¹⁴ Luke 23:43

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:8–9

¹⁶ Romans 6:23

¹⁷ Galatians 1:16, 3:10, 5:4

¹⁸ Romans 2:29

¹⁹ Romans 9:6

²⁰ John 3:5; Titus 3:5; I Peter 3:21

²¹ "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

detergent at the supermarket. Hence, this is a figurative expression that refers to the spiritual phenomenon that stands above the physical washing. In addition, I Peter 3:21 says, “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—*not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience*—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (emphasis added). In other words, it’s not the physical act or the physical removal of dirt that saves you but an appeal to God, the exclusive author of your salvation.²² Condemnation results from lack of belief not lack of baptism.²³

Notice as well that once Jesus gives the command to baptize in the Great Commission, *no one ever self-baptizes*. That is to say, the believer is always dependant on someone else to perform the sacrament, typically someone more knowledgeable in the Word. Hence, within the blueprint for baptism, God built in a subliminal reminder that we, in actuality, aren’t “doing” or “accomplishing” anything but are the recipients of a divine gift that is given by a sovereign God. We are merely the recipients of the sacrament, executed by someone else, that point us to Christ.

Here’s the point: if you are an adult and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, *then get baptized*. If you are reading this lesson, it is unlikely that baptism is an insurmountable hurdle. *Get baptized*. If you live in an area of the world where baptism may mean death, that’s a different story. It is unlikely that this is the case. *Get baptized*. If you live near Queens, NY and need to get baptized, reach out to us. We’ll sit down with you in order to ensure that you understand the sacrament and then baptize you in our church, Deeper Life Christian Fellowship (dlcfc.org). Email us at: dlcfcchurch@gmail.com. *Get baptized!*

Who gets baptized? People who have already received the Word of God and believe in Jesus Christ. Typically, this belief manifests itself in a confession of faith.

The Old Testament correlation of this is in the [Tabernacle](#): the place where God descended from Heaven in order to dwell among His people. In short, progressing through the [Tabernacle](#) meant people were getting closer to God. The first step in the Tabernacle was the brazen altar (the Cross), which represented Christ’s atoning sacrifice at Calvary. If people did not accept Christ’s sacrifice and did not believe in Him, then they could not proceed. It is only *after* they came to the Cross that they could move to the laver, a basin where they could wash with water in order to cleanse themselves (baptism). Belief in Christ comes first, then comes baptism; *they are sequential and distinct*.

After Jesus gives the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, through the chronicles of the early church (Acts), we essentially observe a very predictable formula: a man of God preaches the Word of God. The Holy Spirit then compels those who have heard to believe and then they are baptized. In the following examples, all italics are mine:

²² Hebrews 2:5–18, 5:9

²³ Mark 16:16

“Now *when they heard* [Peter’s sermon], *they were pierced to the heart*, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” *So then, those who had received his word were baptized*; and that day there were added about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:37-41).

“But *when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*, they were being baptized, men and women alike” (Acts 8:12).

“While Peter was still speaking these words, *the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message*. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “*Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?*” *And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days” (Acts 10:44-48).

“A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; *and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul*. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us ... [The jailer] said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” *And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house*. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household” (Acts 16:14-15, 30-34).

Who baptizes? The crucial point to understand is that the command to baptize comes directly from Jesus, Who simply said “baptize” but never specified who can or who can’t do it.

All we do know is that Jesus gave the command to 11 apostles: men who were close to Jesus, worshipped Him, had a strong relationship with Him, and followed and studied under Him during His earthly ministry. While all the apostles are long gone, Jesus’s command is still in full effect. All the examples of people (e.g., Peter, Philip, and Paul) who baptized others in the New Testament reveal that they had a solid comprehension of God’s Word and therefore the ability to communicate sound doctrine and the gospel to others. So, while this does not mean that one’s name has to be preceded by “Rev. Dr.” in order to be qualified to baptize, it certainly does mean that the person would have to do better than googling baptism and then inviting people out to the river. In the end, the

Bible isn't very specific, so we have to go by the *descriptions* in the New Testament as opposed to following *prescriptions*.

Notably, because baptism is a sign of entrance into the body of Christ²⁴ (the Church) it makes sense that the door is revealed in the context of a church so that the baptism is not an isolated event but happens as an introduction to a family and community of believers. This way, after a new believer is baptized, he or she is not left "hanging."

The Methods

Now that we have discussed the principle of baptism, the only question of method I will address is if there is a Biblical case for infant baptism. As I mentioned before, nowhere in the New Testament does it say *who* to baptize. Jesus simply says, "baptize" and so any case for or against infant baptism must be made by implication only. On the one hand, baptism in the New Testament is what circumcision was in the Old, and male infants were circumcised. Yet, in the old covenant, males were incorporated into God's covenantal people *as a function of birth*. In the new covenant, which is better than the old,²⁵ inclusion happens as a function of faith, which *is not* a function of birth. Faith means believing God. And where does faith come from? It comes "from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."²⁶ The question then becomes, if infants may hear but cannot understand or intelligently process, what are they hearing? Can they honestly manifest the faith that is the foundation upon which baptism rests? And if we think about this rationally, no one in their right mind would let a 3-year-old run a corporation. No one would allow a 2-year-old to drive to the playground. No one would allow a 1-year-old to sign a legally binding contract. Why? Because they are children, and at their respective ages, they are incapable of processing the gravity of the situation. So, if reason tells us that we cannot trust infants with natural things, why would we place upon them the burden of understanding something supernatural?

Second, all the records of people being baptized in the New Testament are adults. In some instances, the Bible says that a person's household²⁷ was baptized. This could include infants, *if* infants were in the household. Yet, the question then becomes, *for whose* benefit is the child being baptized—the parent or the child?

My son is currently 2-years-old. He's an expert in counting numbers, but when I try to preach the gospel to him and explain the meaning of baptism, he gives me a blank stare and says something like, "Happy Birthday cake!" (For whatever reason, he just loves saying that). So technically, I could baptize him, cognizant that he has no comprehension of what's going on. The baptism won't save him, nor will it dismiss my responsibility as his father to raise him to be a God-fearing man and a disciple of Christ. So, if the act

²⁴ I Corinthians 12:13

²⁵ Hebrews 7:22, 8:6

²⁶ Romans 10:17

²⁷ For example Acts 16:33; I Corinthians 1:16.

won't save him, at the very least he should understand what he's doing and why he's doing it. Which then brings me back to my original question: *for whose* benefit is the child being baptized? Because of all the arguments that are made for baptizing infants, *the one thing an infant cannot do is consent to being baptized*. The parents can say yes, but the infant can produce no intelligible answer. If then an adult with understanding *can say no* to baptism, they why would we coerce an infant *who cannot intelligently say yes*? If God bestows upon humankind the power to reject Him, He clearly respects our free will, however misguided it may be. Should we not afford the same privilege to infants?

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