

WHY IS WATER BAPTISM SO CONFUSING?

There is no doubt that confusion reigns over the subject of Water Baptism. It has so often been called the “water that divides!” It is so confusing because, almost all Christian Denominations hold some differing view on the subject. Some make it a “sacrament” of Salvation. Others require it in order to become a Christian. Many make it a step of obedience and a true witness to salvation. In this way it is presented as one of the Church “ordinances,” being an established religious practice over the years. Some baptise infants only and others only adults. Then there is one popular denomination which does not practice it at all.

Major denominations teach that water baptism is required as part of salvation, if a person is to become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. They use such Scriptures as: Acts 2:38-41, Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:36-40; 10:47, 48.

It seems that many Bible scholars are not clear as to the meaning of baptism and struggle with such verses as Acts 2:38. They do not differentiate between baptism required for salvation and baptism required as a witness to salvation. For example, Dr William Evans in his book *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, states regarding regeneration (which is a synonym for salvation), that baptism and regeneration are not identical and that the Apostle Paul seemed to make little of the rite of water baptism (1 Cor. 1:14). He believed that, through Paul’s preaching people were saved through the Gospel, *not baptism*. (p 151, par. 1)

To understand fully the subject of Water Baptism in the Bible it would require extensive research. Far more than could be covered in this small leaflet. However, to encourage the reader to study this subject further and to help clarify some of the confusing issues concerning water baptism, we recommend a careful examination of the following insights:

1. WATER BAPTISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

In the Old Testament, the Bible presents water baptism as an important part of the Jewish religious system. This is spelled out in Exodus through Deuteronomy. *Baptismal washings* were practiced regularly as part of the purification process to keep God’s people and God’s Tabernacle free from defilement. (cp. *The Levite Priests’ cleansing* in Exodus 29:4, 7, 20, 21 and Numbers 8:21, 22; *The Lepers’ cleansing* in Lev. 14:1-32; *Menstruation cleansing* for women in Lev. 15:1-33; *Cleansing after contact with the dead* in Numbers 19:13.)

From these references and many more, there seems to be adequate evidence to prove that there were many *baptisms* in the Old Testament, and that the essential meaning in all of them was a *ceremonial purification*. These baptismal washings are referred to in the book of Hebrews, in 6:2 and 9:10. That they were not explicitly called baptisms in the Old Testament itself, is simply because the word “baptism” comes from the Greek word for washings or cleansings. However, when the Greek became the “common” language of the Mediterranean world, and the Jews found it necessary to communicate in Greek, they began to use the word “baptism” to describe the Old Testament rituals of purification. This seems to clearly be the usage in Hebrews 6:2, 9:10; Luke 11:38; and Mark 7:1-13. (See also John 3:22-26.)

2. WATER BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:

A careful and unbiased examination of Water Baptism in the New Testament should reveal to the student the following conclusions:

a) In the New Testament water baptism is essentially the same purification or external cleansing as that of the Old Testament. As is the case in John 3:24, where (Christian) baptism is called a “ceremonial washing.” (Note that in Hebrews 6:2, 9:10 the Greek word ‘*baptismos*’ is translated as Ceremonial “washings”).

(b) The ceremony of *washing in water* (water baptism) is always presented as an accompanying requirement of salvation for any person who will

participate in God’s future Kingdom program on earth, eg. The Millennial reign of Messiah.

Water baptism was practiced as an external cleansing, symbolic of true repentance, belief in and submission to the Messiahship of Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:1, 2; Mark 16:16; John 1:30-34; Acts 2:38).

That baptism was an *essential requirement* can be seen from Luke 7:29 and 30 where Luke states that the Pharisees had rejected God’s purpose “by not being baptised” by John. Even the apostle Paul, who was saved under this Kingdom program, was said to have “washed away his sins” symbolically through the waters of baptism (Acts 22:16). To submit to the Jewish practice of ceremonial cleansing by means of water was a required practice in early New Testament times while God was administering His plans through the nation of Israel.

(c) Water Baptism and the Holy Spirit were both a part of the Kingdom of God in early Acts.

More confusion has developed in Christendom because water baptism and baptism of the Holy Spirit went together during the book of Acts (Acts 2:38, 10:47). This is to be expected since God was still offering the Messiah and His Kingdom to Israel, *which included both the external cleansing and the inner cleansing power of the Holy Spirit* (*Jeremiah 31, Joel 2, Ezekiel 36*).

As Israel rejected Christ and His Kingdom, a new program emerged called the “Church” the Body of Christ and the Dispensation of Grace. This involved the salvation of Gentiles and their becoming members of a uniquely spiritual group called the Body of Christ, without any of the Jewish religious ritual requirements, such as the Mosaic law system, circumcision and water baptism (Ephesians 3, Romans 11, Colossians 1).

From these passages it can be seen that God saved and commissioned the Apostle Paul to make this program known. The book of Acts records a change over or transition from the *Kingdom program* to this new *Church program*. During this change over time, some Jewish rituals continued to be practiced through to the end of

the book of Acts. Some of the Gentiles in the Church also participated in some of these Jewish rituals because the Jewish program was still heavily active (Acts 20:21). That is why Paul himself felt the need to have Timothy circumcised, as he states, “because of the Jews” (Acts 16:1-3); and why, in the early years of Paul’s ministry some were baptised (1 Cor. 1:16).

But water baptism never held the place in Paul’s commission (1 Cor. 1:17) that it did in that of Peter’s (Acts 2:38). Peter could never have said, as Paul did, that “Christ sent me *not* to baptise but to preach the Gospel.” (cp. Acts 2:38)

3. SPIRIT BAPTISM REPLACES WATER BAPTISM:

It is our understanding of the development of the Church Age, or the Age of Grace, that there is no requirement for the practice of the Jewish ceremony of water baptism. The only reference that the Apostle Paul makes in his writings to water baptism is in 1 Cor. 1:16 and 17, where he states that he was glad that he only baptised a few, since Christ sent him “not to baptise but to preach the Gospel.” Had it remained an “essential requirement” in connection with salvation or the Gospel message, then Paul could not have spoken so lightly of water baptism. (Compare 1 Cor. 1:17 with Mark 16:16).

What the Apostle Paul presents extensively is the baptising work performed **BY** the **Holy Spirit** in everyone who believes. At the moment of salvation, all who believe are spiritually linked, united to Christ and placed into His Church as a member of the Body of Christ.

- a) The believer is spiritually “*united with*” Christ and His work (Rom. 6, Gal. 3:26, 27).
- b) The believer is “*placed into*” or made a member of the family of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

In Ephesians 4:3-6, the Apostle Paul lists the Sevenfold “Unity of the Holy Spirit,” which binds together each member of the Body of Christ.

One Lord	One Hope
One Faith	One Spirit
One Baptism	One Body
One God and Father	

This seven-fold unity is composed of seven units and to seek to make any one of them mean two, is to deny inspiration and to destroy the apostle’s insistence of each being “one.” The “one baptism” of the Holy Spirit forms an integral part of this sevenfold unity.. We are no more at liberty to make the *one baptism* mean “two,” (ie. Spirit and water), than we are to make “*one God*” mean “two Gods!” And since the other six units within the sevenfold unity are spiritual in nature, the one baptism must also be spiritual in nature, and not physical (water).

The Lord Jesus Christ, through the Apostle Paul, is here signifying that, in the Church, the Body of Christ, which is predominantly a Gentile Church, the only type of baptism, which is essential, is the baptising work of the Holy Spirit at conversion.

Therefore, we conclude that water baptism is not essential or necessary for members of the Body of Christ in this Church age or age of Grace.

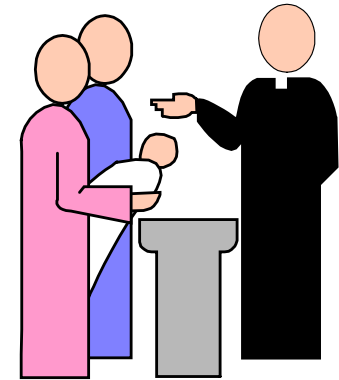
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