

# The Meaning and Purpose of Baptism

## Mark 16:15-16

### Introduction

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God thinks enough of the church that He gives us baptism as a place to “hang our hat,” so to speak. If you ask someone when they were born, they will immediately respond with their birth date. It’s a no brainer. And if you ask me when I was **born again**, when I surrendered my life to Jesus, I would immediately answer, August 28, 1972. To me, it is a no brainer. But I don’t know how many Christians I’ve asked, “When did you become a Christian, when were you born again?” and they come back with this blank stare like they have no idea when they became a new creature in Christ. I’ve had some say, “I’ve always been a Christian. There was never a time when I didn’t believe.”

Others can’t pinpoint a time when they made that surrender to Christ. You don’t find that in Scripture. People **knew** when they made that decision to follow Jesus; they **knew** when they were born again. Take some time to go through the book of Acts, the history book of the early Church, and it becomes very clear. Every time someone came to a decision to follow Christ three things happened: they expressed their faith or belief in Jesus, they committed to turn from their old way of life to follow Jesus (that’s called repentance), and they were then immediately immersed in the waters of baptism.

Jesus set it up this way. He said, “*He that believes and is baptized, shall be saved.*” (Mk 16:15) And then, as He was leaving this earth to go back to His Father, He commissioned His disciples to proclaim the Good News of God’s grace, make disciples, and baptize them. (Mt 28:18-19) That baptism was the turning point of their lives. It cut their lives in two, cementing the decision they had just made to give everything to Jesus and become a new creature in Christ. God designed baptism as a time that every believer can point back to as the beginning point of their new life.

Today we want to spend some time looking at what God says in the Bible about baptism because, while its purpose and meaning appear to be very clear in the early church, it seems to be a point of confusion in the church today. Hopefully, as we listen to God’s word it will end any confusion we may have.

Perhaps the two biggest questions arise over the “**mode**” of baptism (how it is administered), and the “**place**” (or importance) of baptism in the conversion process. So that is what we want to look at today.

First, let’s consider ...

### I. The Mode of Baptism.

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Christianity today is basically divided into ...

**A. Two Camps** ... on this issue:

- 1) Those that practice “**sprinkling**,” pouring water upon the heads of people; and
- 2) Those that practice “**immersion**,” a complete dunking of the body in water.

What is interesting is that--while **churches** disagree in what they practice as far as the “mode” of baptism is concerned -- most **scholars** of all denominations tend to agree that first-century baptism was by immersion.

For example, in the official Roman Catholic Bible, the Confraternity Version, in Romans 6:3 where Paul speaks of being buried with Christ in baptism, the footnote reads: "Here St. Paul alludes to the manner in which baptism was ordinarily conferred in the primitive church -- **by immersion**. The descent of the body into the water is suggestive of the descent of the body into the grave, and the ascent is suggestive of the resurrection to a new life. St. Paul obviously sees more than a mere symbol in the rite of baptism."

The Anglican, or Episcopal Church, also practices sprinkling, but listen to one of their foremost scholars, William Barclay, in his commentary on Romans 6. "Now, when we try to understand what Paul is going on to say, we must remember that baptism -- in the time of Paul -- was **different** from what baptism commonly is today: **First** -- it was **adult** baptism. **Second** -- baptism in the early church was intimately connected with (the **initial**) confession of faith. Baptism marked a **dividing line** in a person's life ... a decision that cut his life in two. **Third** -- commonly, baptism was by **total immersion**, and that practice lent itself to a symbolism which sprinkling does not so readily lend itself to. When a man descended into the water, and the water closed over his head, it was like being buried in a grave. When he emerged from the water, it was like being raised from a grave to a new life"

There are three other groups that usually practice sprinkling -- the Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists -- yet the **founders** of each of these churches taught that baptism in the Bible was by **immersion**.

**John Wesley** -- Methodism's founder -- said: "The Greek word 'baptize' signifies to **immerse**. It is **certain** that **immersion** was the practice of primitive church."

**John Calvin** -- from whom the Presbyterians are derived -- wrote: "**Buried** with Him in baptism -- alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by **immersion**."

**Martin Luther** -- in his commentary on Romans -- stated: "Baptism is a **Greek** word, and may be translated, **immerse**. I would have those who are to be baptized to be **altogether dipped** in water."

Now, the obvious questions come to mind: "If these scholars believe that Bible baptism was **immersion** -- **why** do they believe that?" **And Why** do their churches practice a **different** mode?

### **B. Why Does their BELIEF Differ FROM THEIR Practice?**

The difference is ...

#### **1. A Question of Authority.**

Most denominations believe that there are **two** sources of authority for **Christians -- the Bible and the church**. They further teach that baptism is an ordinance of the church, along with the Lord's Supper -- so they believe that **each church** has authority or control over how they practice and administer **both** baptism and the Lord's Supper. Thus, even though they correctly interpret Scripture on this, they believe **they have authority** to determine their **own practice**.

In non-denominational churches, such as ours, we see **only one** source of "authority"-- **Jesus**, through **His word**. So we seek to make our **practice** line up with **Scripture**, and **don't accept any other authority** in the church but **Christ's**. If the Bible doesn't speak clearly on an issue, God gives us freedom to determine our practice. But if the Bible **does** speak clearly we simply **follow it** as the **authority**.

For example, while the Bible uses the word for "immerse" in speaking of baptism (so we don't believe we have an option of changing that) it does NOT say anything at all about WHO administers baptism (in fact, in most Bible baptisms we have no idea WHO was doing the baptizing) so we have freedom to determine who does the baptizing.

Now, let's answer that **first** question ...

"Why do the scholars of every denomination believe that ...

## **2. Bible Baptism was immersion?"**

The first reason is ...

### **a. the Greek word itself.**

"Baptizo" means to dip, plunge, or immerse in water. It can have no **other meaning**. The Greek's had a word for sprinkling (*rantizo*) but it is **never used** with regard to **baptism**. Julius Caesar, in his book, "Gallic Wars," used *Baptizo* every time he spoke about a ship being sunk.

The second reason involves ...

### **b. the use of the word baptism in its Scriptural context.**

Romans 6:1-6 and Colossians 2:12 both speak of baptism as a **burial** – "**buried with Christ in baptism.**" The ancients normally **buried** just like we do, in a hole, **covered** by dirt. They never merely "**sprinkled**" dirt on them.

In John 3:23 we read that John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon – "*because there was much water there.*"

Obviously, if **much** water was needed, he wasn't sprinkling people.

In Mark 1:10, when Jesus was baptized, we're told that "*when He **came up out of the water,***" the Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. And, when Phillip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 (38-39) we're told that he **went down into** the water and **came up out of** the water.

Because of the obvious meaning of the word *baptizo* and because of these **clear examples** of Scripture, nearly **every** Biblical scholar of **every** denomination interprets baptism in Bible days as **immersion** in water. **SO** -- where did "sprinkling" come into the picture? Let's take a quick look at ...

## **3. The Historical Origin of Sprinkling in the Place of Biblical Immersion.**

To the best of our historical knowledge, sprinkling **began** about the middle of the third century. A letter has been found in which a priest received a special dispensation from his superior to **sprinkle** water upon a dying man too feeble to be immersed.

About 100 years later, **Augustine** was converted and became **the prominent theologian** of his day. He developed what has been called the doctrine of original sin, or "**total depravity.**" This is the teaching that people are **born** in sin, depraved of all goodness – in other words, we are all **born spiritually dead**. He came to this doctrine more from his own **experience** than from his study of Scripture. He was -- in his earlier days -- a real "**hell-raiser.**"

When converted, his life changed so radically that he concluded that all people are spiritually depraved from **birth**. This led quickly to the practice of baptizing **infants** to remove this depravity. **And**, it's much easier to **sprinkle** babies than to **immerse** them. The church practiced both – immersion **and** sprinkling - - for about a thousand years, until, in **1311 A.D.** the Roman Church **officially** adopted sprinkling along with immersion as an acceptable "mode" of baptism. (Council of Ravenna)

It's interesting to note that the Greek Orthodox Church, which accepted Augustine's doctrine of total depravity and began to baptize babies, still refused to practice sprinkling. To this day they **immerse** the infants, because -- being **Greek** they **understand** that the **Greek word** can only mean **immersion**, and if Jesus and His apostle's **gave** this command **in Greek**, **no other practice is obedient His command.**

I was sprinkled as a baby, at least my parents told me I was – because that was the practice of the church they attended – and most people will follow their church because they **assume** the church follows the Bible. I believe that there are ...

#### **4. three problems with Sprinkling babies.**

First -- there is ...

##### **a. no example anywhere in Scripture of a baby being baptized.**

Second --

##### **b. the prerequisites that are always required by Scripture before baptism is valid -- namely: belief, repentance, and confession -- are impossible for babies.**

Jesus taught us to make disciples, **then** baptize them. In every Biblical example of conversion in the book of Acts we find that people first had to believe and repent before they were allowed to be immersed.

Third --

##### **c. the doctrine of total depravity or original sin is not taught in Scripture.**

In fact, the **opposite** is taught. Jesus used little children as **examples** of **innocence** and **faith**. He said: "Let the little children come to me, **for of such is the kingdom of God.**" (Mat 19:14) "Unless you repent, and **become like little children**, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:3) Surely, if Jesus viewed little children as totally depraved and spiritually dead, He wouldn't have used them as **examples of innocence.**

No one would deny that we are born with a bent towards sin – but Scripture clearly states that we are guilty for our own sin, not for Adam's sin. We are guilty because we choose to sin. The Bible says, "When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, **for everyone sinned.**" (Rom 5:12) Babies don't need to be baptized because they are innocent and free of sin. But, once we're old enough to choose to sin we are old enough to choose to follow Jesus.

Now let's take a look at ...

## **II. The place (or importance) of baptism in the believer's life.**

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To get a "theology" of baptism we must look at what the Scriptures say about baptism. This may sound simplistic, but I am convinced that many get their doctrine of baptism from Scriptures that don't even use the word. When we look at those passages where the word for baptism is used, we find ...

### **A. Baptism's Significance in Scripture.**

1. (Rom. 6:3; Gal 3:27) Baptism is "**into Christ.**"

2. (Acts 2:38) Baptism is “**for** (i.e. results in or leads to) *the forgiveness of sins.*”
3. (Rom 6:4) Baptism **raises** us to **newness** of life.
4. (1 Pet 3:20-21) Baptism **saves** us.
5. (Acts 22:16) Baptism **washes away sins.**
6. (Acts 2:38) Baptism results in one **receiving** the **Holy Spirit.**
7. (1 Cor. 12:13) Baptism brings us **into** the **body** of Christ.
8. (Gal 3:27) Baptism **clothes us** in Christ. In baptism we put on Christ.
9. (Mk. 16:16) Baptism, coupled with belief, gives **assurance of salvation.**

In reading these passages we must certainly conclude that baptism was **extremely important** to the apostolic writers, that it was **intimately connected** with **salvation** and **conversion to new life.**

I think we also should conclude, from our own judgment, that no solitary action, such as baptism, brings salvation; in other words, we are not saved by a **ceremony** or a **ritual.**

Jesus said something important in Mark 16:16: “*He who has **believed** and has been **baptized** shall be **saved**, but he who has **disbelieved** shall be **condemned.**” Notice what He says:*

Belief **plus** baptism **equals** salvation

Unbelief **equals** condemnation

**Why** didn’t Jesus answer the question –“Will believers who have **not been immersed** be saved?” The **answer** is: there were **no such people** in the first century. Every believer was **immediately immersed** upon his **initial confession of faith** in Christ as Lord. The immersion was the “**act of initiation**” into the Lord’s body -- **not** into a **local church**, but “**into Christ.**” (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3)

All evangelical Christian groups relate the purpose for Christ’s coming and His purpose for the church to the “Great Commission” that He gave just before His ascension to God. He gathered the leaders of His future church together for His last words -- and told them: “*All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth, go, therefore, into all the world and **make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.***” (Mat 28:18-20)

How did these apostles seek to carry out His commission to bring people to salvation? The answer can be seen by a look at ...

### **B. the Bible conversions ...**

that are given in some detail in the book of Acts, and in **every case** the **same details** were involved:

- **Acts 2** – 3000 people on Pentecost became Christians. How? They **believed, repented,** and were **immersed.** (Keep those things in mind.) The **next** conversion given in detail is in ...
- **Acts 8** -- The Holy Spirit prompted Philip to run up alongside a chariot in which the Ethiopian eunuch was sitting and reading from Isaiah 53. Listen: “*Then Philip ... beginning*

from this Scripture **preached Jesus** to him. As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, **'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?'** Philip said, 'If you **believe** with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, **'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'** And ... he **baptized** him." (Acts 8:35-38) Notice that the text says nothing about baptism in Phillip's message, it simply says he "preached Jesus," but this evidently **included baptism**, for when they came to a lake, the eunuch spoke up: "Look, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized?"

- **Acts 16** -- the Philippian jailer, frightened out of his wits by an earthquake, went to Paul and Silas and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They told him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and then he was immersed immediately, the "same hour of the night," even though it was after midnight. (Acts 16:30-33)
- **Acts 9, 22, 26** – The story of Paul's conversion is told three times. We find that He spoke to Jesus, at which time he definitely became a **believer**, went to a home in Damascus where Jesus told him to go, spent **three days** there in **repentance, fasting, and prayer**, and **then** was told by God what he **must** do: "**Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.**" (Acts 22:16) Evidently, the repenting, fasting, and prayer were not enough to cleanse him of sin, until he was baptized.

And yet there are those today that teach that all one must do is pray a certain prayer for salvation. Let me challenge you to do something – this will blow you away. Look through the New Testament to see if you can ever find **ONE** example of someone praying the sinner's prayer when they came to Christ. You will **not find a single example** of that.

What you **will find** is that in **every case** they "**appealed to God for a good conscience.**" And you know **how** they did it – **not** by a **verbal prayer** but by being **immersed**. Peter says, "**Baptism now saves you – not the washing of dirt from the flesh - but an appeal to God for a good conscience.**" (1 Peter 3:21) **Baptism** is the way God designed for a **sinner** to **appeal to God** for His cleansing.

In each of the detailed accounts of Bible conversions we find evidence of **faith** (or **belief**) sufficient to move the believer to **turn away from sin** and turn to God (**repentance**), **confess** his/her **faith**, and be **immersed**.

It is a "**package deal**": initial **faith**, which was **not** merely verbal assent, but resulted in a specific response or action: **repentance, confession, and baptism.**

The question, "At what point does forgiveness occur?" is not raised. There are times when Scripture indicates ...

- That **faith** saves us: "For by grace you have been saved **through faith.**" (Eph 2:8-9)
- That **repentance** saves us: Jesus said, "**that repentance** for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations." (Lk 24:47; 13:3)
- That **confession** saves us: "If you **confess with your mouth** Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and **with the mouth he confesses**, resulting in salvation." (Rom 10:9-10)
- That "**baptism** now saves us." (1 Pet. 3:20-21)

Does this mean that **God is confused**, not quite knowing **when** He will actually forgive us? **Not at all.** The point is: **When** we are saved is God's business. **He knows our heart.** He has not appointed us to judge the world. Our object is not to determine who is **saved** and who is **lost**. Our goal is to lead people to faith and build them up in faith, and to teach them to do what Christ commanded: to **believe, repent, confess** their faith, and **be immersed**.

Originally, in the apostolic days, **every** new believer was involved in the whole “package.” He never **merely** believed; he never **merely** was immersed. Initial faith, repentance, confession, and immersion all went together.

Our object is to restore this original plan, which is all included in the Great Commission Jesus gave us: “Go into all the world, **make** disciples, **baptize** them, **teach** them to do all I’ve commanded you.” (Mat 28:18-20) If you and I lead **every** new believer to faith, repentance, confession, and immersion -- then we **never need** to ask the question “at **what point** is a person saved?”

Rather than splitting hairs, let’s simply keep the “**package**” intact. In understanding Scripture we must seek to put ourselves in the shoes of the first-century audience. Try to do that. Picture yourself back with the apostles in the first century. You are excited and amazed to see people responding to the Gospel. It happens again and again as you follow Peter or Paul around.

Now, if, in **every conversion** you witness, the same basic things happen – they **believe, confess** their **faith, turn** from their **sin**, and are **immersed** in the river – in each and every case **all four parts** of the “**package**” are manifested, then you would use **any of the four terms** to speak of the whole process.

Certainly Peter didn’t mean that **baptism** saves us, (1 Pet. 3:21) **apart from** the other three responses; nor did Paul mean that **faith** saves us if it is only intellectual assent, **apart from** the other three parts of the package. (Eph 2:8-9) I believe the mindset of the first-century Christians enabled them to think of the “**package**” whenever **any one** of the words was used with respect to conversion to Christ.

Exactly as **our mindset today** enables us to say what makes plants grow: the sun; photosynthesis; sufficient water; or good soil. ... We may say **any one** of those things, but when we say one of them we **know** that we are really speaking of a “**package**.” In **truth, they all go together** -- and we don’t say one without realizing the importance of each. That’s why Jesus used the **first** and **last** parts of the **PACKAGE** to represent the **whole** when He said, “*He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.*” (Mk 16:16) He didn’t mean **ONLY belief** anymore than He meant **ONLY baptism**. No – in the Bible you must **believe, repent, confess**, and be **immersed** – it happened time and time again.

The problem on the place, or importance, of baptism is due to the church. Though there were no **unimmersed** believers in Paul’s day, there are millions today. Again, our place is not to judge, but to restore and teach. It is the church that has broken up the “**package**.” We need to put it back together. Jesus said: “*If you love Me, you’ll keep My commandments.*” (Jn. 14:15)

Rather than judging and “*straining at gnats*” to decide who is saved and who isn’t, let’s simply restore God’s original package, and encourage all people to love the Lord and to obey His commands: to **believe, repent, confess**, and **be immersed** -- starting with **where they are** and “*leading them in the way of the Lord more perfectly,*” just as Priscilla and Aquila did Apollos. (Acts 18:26)