

# Biblical Baptism



Dr. Bobby Harrington

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But because of his great love for us,  
God, who is rich in mercy, made us  
alive with Christ even when we were  
dead in transgressions — it is by grace  
you have been saved.

**Ephesians 2:4–5**



How do grace, faith, repentance, and baptism fit together? How do they relate to salvation? Is there any direct tie between baptism and the way God takes away human sin? Some think that only immersion constitutes baptism, others do not. Is baptism for infants, or is it only for adults? What does the Bible teach?

The following twelve principles outline our understanding of the Biblical teaching on the relationship between grace, faith, repentance, baptism, and salvation:

1. Salvation is a free gift of God based upon Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross (Salvation is by Grace).
2. Salvation is received through personal faith in Jesus Christ.
3. Baptism's role in conversion is typically over or under emphasized.
4. Baptism is for expressing the personal commitment to trust and follow Jesus Christ.
5. Biblical baptism emphasizes Jesus Christ's saving power.
6. Biblical baptism expresses repentance — the commitment to turn from sin.
7. The baptism or reception of the Holy Spirit normally occurred in water baptism.

8. Biblical baptism was not for infants.
9. Biblical baptism was immersion.
10. God's saving power is not limited to proper baptism.
11. The indwelling Holy Spirit is the essential mark of salvation.
12. Biblical baptism is an important practice for this local church.

While affirming the priorities of grace and faith, we also affirm the classic and historic Christian understanding of the purpose of baptism, held almost universally for the first 1500 years of Christian history.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a technical and scholarly book which supports the position taken in this paper, see G.R. Beasley Murry, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), the standard English-written scholarly work on baptism in our day. For information on the historical heritage of this view see, editor, *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*. ed. Fletcher, David ( Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1990). Larry Stalley did extensive research for a Master's degree on baptism in the Post-Apostolic church, see Larry Stalley, *Baptism In The Early Post-Apostolic Church* (M. A. R. Guided Research, Harding University Graduate School, 1980). See also Jack P. Lewis, "Baptismal Practices of the Second and Third Century Church," *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 26 (1983): 1–17; and Everett Ferguson, *The Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, reprint 1994). This understanding is reflected in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381 which states "I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins." See *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 Volumes, ed. Philip Schaff (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996).





photo by Jordan McQueen





1.

Salvation is a free gift of God based upon Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross.



The Bible teaches that God offers human beings the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1–8). This salvation is the free gift of God. All human beings are bankrupt sinners who have nothing to give God to gain his favor: God’s freely offered salvation is our only hope. This gift is called “grace” — defined as the unearned favor given by God through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for our sins. The wonderful opportunity of salvation “by grace” simply means this: God takes away our sin, breaks Satan’s hold on our lives, and gives us eternal life through Jesus’ work on the cross.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.

### **Ephesians 2:4–5**

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord ... who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

### **2 Timothy 1:8–10**

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy ... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

### **Titus 3:4–7**

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

### **Romans 5:6–8**

Under grace, God does not treat us as we deserve. Instead, He shows us infinite love and mercy. All praise and glory belong to God. Salvation is God's gift; it is a reflection not just of God's character, but especially of his love for human beings.

“

Grace is God as heart surgeon,  
cracking open your chest,  
removing your heart — poisoned  
as it is with pride and pain — and  
replacing it with his own.

”

**Max Lucado**



photo by David Mao

**2.**

Salvation is  
received through  
personal faith in  
Jesus Christ.



Salvation is free, but it must be accepted. It is only granted to those who have faith in Jesus. In this sense it is a conditional gift. God works in our hearts to lead us into faith, but we must choose to believe (1 John 2:20, 27; Acts 7:51).<sup>2</sup>

Faith is in no way meritorious — but it is the channel by which we cling to that which has merit — God’s Son. The fact that Christ died for our sins is the ground upon which God, in full harmony with His holiness, offers salvation to those who will trust in Christ. Thus, the Bible teaches that salvation is by Grace through faith, or its synonym, belief.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.

**Ephesians 2:8–9**

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

**John 3:16**

Thus, while stressing that the only merit that saves us is the merit of Christ, it is necessary to point out that it is received through personal faith.

Faith in its most essential element is personal trust. True faith emerges as a total reliance, not just on the blood of Christ, but on the person of Christ. True faith inherently carries within it the “willingness to obey” or “preparedness to act.” In this way, we give ourselves up and

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<sup>2</sup> Many believe the Arminian Creed of AD 1610 is correct when it describes God’s work within us, creating faith as Grace. Article 3 says “That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do any thing that is truly good (such as saving faith eminently is); but that is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think will, and effect what is truly good, according to the Word of Christ, John 15:5: ‘Without me you can do nothing.’” Article 4 states, “That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But as respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible, inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Spirit, Acts 7 and elsewhere in many places.” See *The Creeds of Christendom*, Schaff.

pledge our whole beings and lives to the leadership (Lordship) of Jesus. We embrace Jesus Christ as our leader, teacher, or master.

The initial decision is quite simple. In its essential form it is simply the pledge of our hearts to trust in Jesus. The following passage teaches the bare bones of what is involved in salvation. This confession was usually made at the time a person was being baptized.<sup>3</sup>

“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

**Romans 10:8–11**

Christianity in its naked essence, then, begins with a simple faith which leads into a transforming relationship with God through trusting and submitting to Jesus Christ.

“

Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning. Effort is action. Earning is attitude.... That grace is, of course, “unmerited favor.” But the form it takes is the action of God in our lives and with our actions.

”

**Dallas Willard**

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<sup>3</sup> See respected commentator C.B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), 257. In regard to Romans 10:9–10, he states, “it seems clear that ‘Jesus is Lord’ was already an established confession formula. It is probable that it was used in connection with baptism....”





photo by Davide Ragusa



**3.**

Baptism's role  
in conversion is  
typically over or  
under emphasized.



Baptism is integral to making the pledge of faith in the conversion process. However, some groups erroneously teach that baptism itself brings salvation. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Churches, and others hold that the act of baptism by itself is that which moves God to bestow his grace and forgiveness. They believe that salvation is granted to infants who have no personal faith when they are baptized. Grace and salvation come, in their view, without faith or “independently of the psychological state of either minister or recipient” through the infant rite.<sup>4</sup> The view that baptism, independent of an expression of personal faith, brings salvation, puts too much emphasis on baptism. It contradicts the Biblical teaching that we are saved by grace through faith.

On the other hand, many Protestant groups teach that baptism has nothing or little to do with the conversion process. Some groups — such as the Quakers and Salvation Army — do not even practice baptism. Starting with Zwingli in the 1500s, many have taken the position that baptism was merely a symbol of salvation which was already received by saying a special prayer of faith. One often hears statements such as the following:

- Baptism is a public and symbolic declaration of the saving work God has already provided for those who made a commitment or said a prayer of faith in Christ.
- Baptism is a public ceremony which make one’s previous commitment to God “public.”

The problem with these statements is that one searches in vain to find explicit scriptural support for them.

Typically, baptism is either over-emphasized or under-emphasized. We believe there is a better way to understand it.

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<sup>4</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz “Baptism,” *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 106.

“

Baptism separates the tire kickers  
from the car buyers.

”

**Max Lucado**



photo by Joshua Earle



**4.**  
Baptism is for  
expressing  
the personal  
commitment to  
trust and follow  
Jesus Christ.



**T**he holistic Biblical view emphasizes faith as the human response to God's grace in Jesus — while seeing baptism as the vehicle or method of expressing this faith as a personal commitment. This understanding gives proper place to faith as the essential human response, while affirming baptism as integral to the conversion process.

To gain insight into the Biblical understanding of baptism it is helpful to review the following passages:

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**Acts 2:37–38**

"Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.... And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

**Acts 22:14–16**

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

**1 Peter 3:20–22**

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

**Galatians 3:26–29**

Notice that each of these passages relates baptism to a personal commitment. In Acts 2:37–38 Peter told the people to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of

your sins.”<sup>5</sup> The phrase, “in the name of Jesus Christ,” in this passage is a commitment of trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. I. Howard Marshall has an interesting comment on this passage:

However precisely the phrase be understood, it conveys the thought that the person being baptized enters into allegiance to Jesus.... Thus Christian baptism was an expression of faith and commitment to Jesus as Lord.<sup>6</sup>

We see a similar point being made in Acts 22:16. When Ananias finished telling Paul about Jesus and God’s special mission for him, Paul was told to respond by arising and being baptized to wash away his sins. His baptism was the prescribed way to call upon Jesus’ name for forgiveness. Baptism in this passage was a formal commitment or appeal to the saving merit of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

1 Peter 3:21 teaches that baptism was the pledge or appeal to God for a clean conscience. Galatians 3:26–27 explicitly states that baptism was a formal commitment to clothe oneself with Christ. This is also the meaning of baptism in the great commission. Jesus told the apostles to make disciples (followers) by baptizing them and teaching them to obey his commandments (Matthew 28:19–20).

These passages show that for the early Christians baptism was the God given method for expressing one’s commitment to trust and follow Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Some dispute the English rendition of this passage, arguing that the preposition *eis* (for the) somehow means that people are baptized “because of the” forgiveness of sins (making baptism simply a symbol of salvation previously received). Technically and linguistically this is not correct. The English translations have it right — see Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1989), 55–61. For the syntactical and grammatical background see Carroll D. Osburn, “The Third Person Imperative in Acts 2:38,” *Restoration Quarterly* (1983): 81–84.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles, in The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 81.

<sup>7</sup> We are not saying that every reference to baptism that uses this phrase means the same thing. In Matthew 28:19 it seems that “the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” has meaning as a reference to ownership. See the technical reference works listed above.





photo by Axel Antas-Bergkvist



**5.**

Biblical baptism  
emphasizes Jesus  
Christ's saving  
power.



Baptism was done “in Jesus’ name,” as a way of “calling on the Lord” or as “the pledge of a good conscience to God” based on “the resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> This is why baptism brought the “forgiveness of sin” and the “gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). This is also why baptism could “wash your sins away” (Acts 22:16). And this is why Jesus said “he who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). In baptism one was spiritually “raised with Christ” through faith in the power of God (Colossians 2:12). This is because in Biblical baptism people reached out in faith to accept what God provided through Christ.

In 1 Peter 3:21 Peter encouraged Christians to be faithful to God, even though they were few in number. Peter reminded them of Noah, for he too, was one of only a few who followed God. Peter said Noah was saved through the waters of the flood. The water through which Noah was saved served as a foreshadow of Christian baptism. In the first century it separated the few who were saved from the many who were unsaved.

Baptism now saves you also — not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

#### **1 Peter 3:21–22**

This passage shows that the real meaning of baptism is found not in the act itself, but in the appeal to the resurrection and power of Jesus Christ. Baptism, Peter says, points to the risen Lord who has angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. The water of baptism, or the act of baptism, had no merit in itself; it was simply the God-ordained method of appealing to the saving work of Jesus Christ for salvation.

It is important to clarify this point, because without it some have wrongly concluded that the saving merit of baptism is found in the act itself. God provides salvation through Jesus Christ, and baptism has its meaning as an appeal to what God freely provides through him. Galatians 3:26–27 smoothly relates the two: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

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<sup>8</sup> For more technical work on the following approach see H. Bietenhard, “Prepositions with baptizo,” in *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1975), 3: 1207–1211; Lars Hartman, “Into the Name of Jesus,” *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973): 432–440; and Lars Hartman, “Baptism Into the Name of Jesus’ and Early Christianity,” *Studia Theologica* 28 (1974): 21–48.

Baptism, not as a work, but as the mode of expressing saving faith is the Biblical path. We summarize it this way — baptism is the form, personal faith in Jesus is the substance.

“

Low self-esteem causes me to believe that I have so little worth that my response does not matter.

With repentance, however, I understand that being worth so much to God is why my response is so important.

”

**John Ortberg**



photo by Tim Mossholder

6.

Biblical baptism  
expresses  
repentance — the  
commitment to  
turn from sin.



The Greek word used in the New Testament for “repentance” (*metanoia*) literally means, “to have another mind,” or “a change of mind.” It is a decision to make a change. It is to turn around and go a different direction. Christian repentance is to place personal faith in Christ, as you turn away from sin.

Through repentance one (1) renounces his or her sin and selfish living, and (2) embraces Jesus as Savior and Lord (the alternative to sin and selfish living). The Bible is clear. Repentance is at the heart of the Christian faith. We cannot properly embrace Jesus Christ in faith unless we simultaneously pledge to turn from sin and repent. God offers us healing from our sin, but we must be willing to it up.

True conversion is like a two-sided coin. One side is repentance, the other side is trust in Jesus. We can’t turn to something unless we are simultaneously turning away from something else, just as you cannot have a one-sided coin.

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

**Acts 3:19**

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

**Acts 20:21**

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

**Acts 26:20**

One way of summarizing these passages is to say that repentance is an integral part of saving faith in Jesus Christ and essential for those who wish to receive his salvation.

In the Bible both faith and repentance were pulled together in baptism. Baptism made faith and repentance a concrete commitment to God.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be bap-



tized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

**Acts 2:37–38**

There are several other places where faith and repentance are tied together in the Bible (Luke 3:3ff; Colossians 2:11–12; 3:1–12; etc.).

The book of Romans contains a long section describing how a Christian has pledged himself or herself to turn from sin to live for God’s way. The metaphor used to introduce this concept was “death” — a Christian pledged to die to the controlling influence of the sinful nature when they came to faith in Christ. The Bible ties this repentance as a “death” directly to baptism.

Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

**Romans 6:3–5**

In this way Christians naturally looked back to their baptism as a turning point in their lives — the end of the old way and the beginning of God’s new way.



photo by Jacob Walti



An underwater scene with a person's head and arm visible, surrounded by bubbles. A large yellow circle is centered on the image, containing text and a symbol.

7.

The baptism or  
reception of the  
Holy Spirit normally  
occurred in water  
baptism.



The possession of the Holy Spirit is the distinguishing mark given in the Bible to delineate Christian from non-Christian (Acts 19:1–5; Romans 8:9; Ephesians 1:13–14). Acts 2:38 teaches that the Spirit of God was given to the believer at the point of water baptism. This reality was spoken of in the Bible by the use of several phrases that which were synonymous:

- to be “baptized in the Spirit”
- to have the “Spirit poured out”
- to receive the “promise of the Spirit”
- “the gift of the Spirit”
- to have the “Spirit come upon you”

These are all different ways of describing the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell within and establish a person as a Child of God.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, every person who is a Christian has been “baptized in the Holy Spirit” and has received “the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.” As 1 Corinthians says, “for we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13).<sup>10</sup>

The following passages refer to one baptism with two parts: the external water and the internal Spirit.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured

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<sup>9</sup> For technical scholarly support of this point, consult Bruce Terry, “Baptized in One Spirit,” *Restoration Quarterly* 21 (1978): 193–200, or Moses Lard, “Baptism in One Spirit into One Body,” *Lard’s Quarterly* 1 (March, 1864): 271–282.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on how these terms have been applied incorrectly in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements consult Fredrick Dale Brunner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), John R. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

**Titus 3:4–7**

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

**1 Corinthians 6:11**

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” <sup>11</sup>

**John 3:5**

This causes us to believe that God’s ideal is for baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit to occur at the same time.

This truth lies behind the Biblical account of the re-baptism of twelve disciples in Acts 19. The apostle Paul traveled through Ephesus and there he met men who had been followers of John the Baptist. Paul asked if they had received the Holy Spirit. When they said that they had not even heard about the Holy Spirit, Paul instantly knew that there was an error in their baptism:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.

**Acts 19:1–7**

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<sup>11</sup> Those who wonder if “water” in this context is a reference to baptism may want to examine Jack Cottrell’s book, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1989), 33ff.

The apostle's solution to an improper understanding and relationship with the Holy Spirit was a proper belief about Jesus Christ and baptism in his name. To confirm Paul's teaching and to show that God was now grafting these followers of John the Baptist into the main stream of Christianity with their baptism, they were also enabled to speak in tongues and prophecy.<sup>12</sup> This passage points to the typical relationship between Spirit and water baptism.

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<sup>12</sup> If we are to come to a proper understanding of water and Spirit baptism we will need to gain big-picture perspective on water and Spirit baptism in Acts. There are several things that need to be considered.

First, Acts 1:4–8 picks up on the ending of Luke (24:45–49) and lays down the grid for the book of Acts: the witness of the Apostles in the power of the Spirit in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world (Roman Empire). The book starts in Jerusalem (1:4) and ends in Rome (the center of the Roman Empire) with a statement about Paul boldly preaching about the Lord Jesus Christ (28:31).

Second, given this overall grid, Acts 2:38 is very important to the working out of the response that people make to the testimony of the apostles about Jesus. In Acts 1:4–5 Jesus promised that the baptism in the Spirit would soon come. In Acts 2 the promise was fulfilled, first for the twelve men (2:1–4; especially 14–15) and then it was offered to all people who wanted to respond to Jesus (2:38). Acts 2:38 is very important because repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is a response that is here laid down as a normative pattern or paradigm for all people (all who are far off). Acts 2:38 is explicitly set up as the standard for the rest of the book of Acts.

Third, once this grid is understood, we can see that people first responded to the message of faith by being baptized in the name of Jesus in Jerusalem (2:41). By inference this same message proceeded through out the rest of Judea as well (5:16). The next phase of Jesus' promise in 1:8 is in Samaria. God fulfilled this promise by scattering the church throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). But in Acts 8 when the Samaritans heard the good news of the kingdom of God and were baptized in the name of Jesus, they do not receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (8:12; 15–17). The text seems to imply that this was somewhat unusual (8:16), but given the grid of Acts 1:4–8 it makes sense: the Samaritans were no longer able to consider themselves as a separate people (John 4); they were now tied in with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, most notably through deliberate and miraculous signs associated with the apostles Peter and John. These two men were sent from Jerusalem to help bring about the bestowal of the Spirit. This confirms for all that the message of faith has come to the Samaritans and that they were truly joined with God's people. This is an exception to the pattern which God brought about for the purpose of drawing attention to the joining of the Samaritan Christians with the Jewish Christians, in fulfillment of passages like Jeremiah 31:31–34, where God had said that the two divisions of the Israelite nation would be brought together in the new covenant.

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Fourth, the pattern of Acts 2:38 is assumed in the progress of the book of Acts, as is evidenced in conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8: 36,38) and the conversion of Paul (9:18; 22:16). However, God intervenes in the case of Cornelius, for the purpose of convincing Peter that Gentiles are also now to be included. Once Peter realized what God was showing him, he said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” It is clear from this that Peter continued to believe that the two baptisms should be tied together (11:15–17). This case, like the case of the Samaritans, is an unusual case where God deviated from the pattern to show Peter and all of us (15:8) that this new people–group is also included in the faith and testimony of the new covenant.

Fifth, the pattern of Acts 2:38 continues to be assumed after the conversion of Cornelius as it was beforehand. This fact is substantiated by the conversion of Lydia and her household (16:15), the Philippian jailer and his household (16:31–33), and Crispus, his household, and many Corinthians who “believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8). However in Acts 18 and 19 we read about Apollos (who knew the way of the Lord, but had to be taught about proper baptism) and then twelve disciples who did not have the Holy Spirit. Once again, we have an entirely new group of people. They are not Israelites, they are not Samaritans, and they are not Gentiles: they are followers of John the Baptist. The first sign that Paul looks for to determine if these people are Christians is the possession of the Spirit (19:2). This inquiry is naturally the first, because it is the most important sign of a Christian (Ephesians 1:13–14; Romans 8:9). When Paul finds out that they do not have the Spirit, he automatically assumes that their baptism was in error (19:3). It makes sense that Paul would feel this way, only if he believed that reception of the Spirit was typically tied with baptism, as it is in Acts 2:38. The solution to the fact that they did not have the Spirit is found through baptism in the name of Jesus. The confirmation comes when, as part of the ceremony, Paul lays his hand on them and they speak in tongues.

Sixth, the only other discussion of baptism after Acts 19 is when Paul retells the story of his conversion in Acts 22:16. This case explicitly confirms the pattern of Acts 2:38.

Thus in Acts, and elsewhere in the New Testament, the effectual saving work of God done by the Holy Spirit is promised to those who embrace Jesus by faith in baptism. The reception of the Spirit commonly occurs during water baptism, but there were exceptions in the Bible. This view makes the best sense out of the practice of baptism in Acts.



photo by Jeff Sheldon





8.  
Biblical baptism  
was not for infants.



There are many different concepts in the Christian world about when one is ready for baptism. Some think that even infants can be baptized and others do not. If we follow the Bible, there are some principles that will guide us.

First, a person must believe in Jesus Christ to be baptized. Jesus himself said, “whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). Peter described baptism as the point at which a person was saved because at that time he or she pledged a good conscience to God (1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16). The Biblical evidence indicates that only those capable of personally believing in Jesus, pledging a good conscience, and calling on his name were baptized.

Second, as noted above, baptism was a pledge of personal repentance. On the day of Pentecost Peter told at least three thousand people that they were to “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). The promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins was available only to those who could repent and be baptized. Thus, to be baptized, a person should be at a point of moral development where they realize the wrongs that have been committed and how their actions have been an affront to God.

These are important facts, because in the Jewish covenant infants were automatically added to the covenant community when their parents had them circumcised. But the New Covenant is different in this regard: it is only open to those who choose to trust and follow Jesus Christ. The difference is that Christianity is not an ethnic or national religion. It is a multi-ethnic and a multi-national faith in which a person enters into a saving relationship with God only by his or her personal choice.<sup>13</sup> Notice how the apostle Paul contrasted the two systems:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.

**Colossians 2:11–13**

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<sup>13</sup> A child’s inherent standing before God (Matthew 19:13–15) and the sanctifying cover of a parent’s faith (7:14) are to be trusted as enough to keep children safe until they reach the necessary level of spiritual development where they can make the personal decision to turn away from sin (even as a future life path) to faith in Christ.



Paul pointed out that baptism was like circumcision, in that through it people were brought into covenant relationship with God. But unlike circumcision, the one being baptized expressed “faith in the power of God.” Baptism was an expression and a commitment of personal faith. In this sense it was not something that parents could do for their children. If we are to follow the Bible, the only people who are eligible for baptism are those who are old enough to make the personal decision to turn away from their sins and to trust in Jesus Christ. This also explains why infant baptism did not start to become a common practice until one hundred years after the Bible was written.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The explicit initiation of infant baptism dates to the latter part of the second century (one hundred years after the Bible was written). We know that the church father Tertullian opposed it on the grounds that it would be safer and more profitable to wait until faith was formed in the believing adult. Infant baptism did not become an established practice until the fourth century. See F. LaGard Smith, *Baptism: The Believer's Wedding Ceremony* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 1989), 115–116. See also Larry Stalley, *Baptism In The Early Post-Apostolic Church* (M. A. R. Guided Research, Harding University Graduate School, 1980); Lewis, “Baptismal Practices,” *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 26 : 1–17; and Ferguson, *The Early Christians Speak*. Attempts to find infant baptism within the description of households coming to faith typically minimizes the fact that “households” in the ancient world typically included relatives, in-laws, and slaves. A careful examination of the conversions in Acts 10 demonstrates this truth.



photo by Justin Leibow

9.

Biblical baptism  
was immersion.



The New Testament was written in the Greek language. The Greek word used in the New Testament for baptism is *baptizein* (*baptizo*). It means “to dip, plunge, or to immerse.”<sup>15</sup> If God had wanted us to follow a different method of baptism then it would have been reflected by the use of other words to describe this act. If he had meant to say “pour” he could have used *ekcheo*, which means, “to pour out.” If he wanted to say “sprinkle” he would have used *rantizo*, which means, “to sprinkle.” God intended for the Biblical writers to describe immersion because without exception every writer in the New Testament used the Greek word *baptizein* when discussing this act.<sup>16</sup> By following the New Testament we know that when the writers speak of baptism they mean immersion, because that is what *baptizein* means and that is the word which is used.<sup>17</sup>

Even without knowing that the word for baptism in the original text was baptizien, one can still determine what baptism is by the description of baptism that is presented in the New Testament. One of the clearest examples of this is found in the sixth chapter of the book of Romans. The apostle Paul wanted to remind these early Christians of the need for holy living. In order to remind them of God’s grace and their original commitment, Paul recalled for them the time when they were baptized. He described baptism as a drama that pictured three distinct acts. The first act was a death. When a person went into the water they pledged to identify themselves with Christ’s death (v. 3). The second act was a burial. In this burial in water a person re-enacted the burial of Christ (v. 4). The third act was a resurrection. In coming out of the water, a person was raised to live a new kind of life (vs. 4–5). Whenever a

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<sup>15</sup> For more information see Walter Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd. ed., revised by William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Also, consult the comprehensive study of Thomas Conant, *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1977).

<sup>16</sup> In Leviticus 14:15, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) each of these words is used to indicate the three distinct actions that they describe: pouring, sprinkling and dipping.

<sup>17</sup> The first instance of pouring is found in the *Didache*, written about 20 years after the last book of the New Testament. Pouring is referred to as the third and last method to resort to if one wants to be baptized. Widespread acceptance of something less than immersion did not occur until the fifth century. See Smith, *Baptism*, 96. See also Larry Stalley, *Baptism In The Early Post–Apostolic Church* (M. A. R. Guided Research, Harding University Graduate School, 1980); Lewis, “Baptismal Practices,” *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 26: 1–17; Ferguson, *The Early Christians Speak*.

person was baptized there was a re-enactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. No other action communicated this rich Biblical principle except immersion.

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

### **Romans 6:3–5**

Accordingly, without knowing anything about Greek, one could see that baptism, in that it is a death, a burial, and then a raising up with Christ, must be immersion. The form of baptism to which we respond is a pattern maker for the rest of our lives — we are constantly dying to self and raising Christ up (Romans 6:17). In Colossians 2:11–12 the same point can be made.<sup>18</sup>

It would be unwise to look upon immersion as simply a cultural practice used to express faith in Christ in the first century. These passages show that the meaning of the commitment to follow Christ cannot be separated from the method that is used to make the commitment. Stated another way, the meaning is tied to the method. Full immersion in water is a concrete expression of what is involved when a person becomes a Christian: only in this practice can someone physically re-enact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Only immersion symbolizes that which lies at the heart of conversion and the entire Christian life — the constant dying to self and rising with Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> Consider three further lines of related evidence. First, when a person wanted to be baptized in the New Testament, they went to the water. The Bible never recorded that water was brought to the person seeking baptism. People went to where there was an abundant supply of water (“much water”; see John 3:23; Acts 8:36). This would be necessary only if baptism was an immersion in water. Second, the Bible teaches that when people arrived at a place where there was water, they went down into it. The Scriptures indicate that the person being baptized and the person doing the baptism both went down into the water (Acts 8:36; Matthew 3:5–6). Third, after baptism, both the person being baptized and the person performing the baptism came up out of the water (Mark 1:10; Acts 8:39). For both people to go down into the water, then to perform the baptism in the water, followed by both people coming out of the water, only makes sense if baptism was by immersion. All of this would have been needless effort if baptism were by sprinkling or pouring.





photo by Joseph Barrientos

**10.**

God's saving  
power is not  
limited to proper  
baptism.





Instead of asking people to respond to Jesus' finished work on the cross by expressing faith and repentance in baptism, many Bible believing churches encourage people to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior through saying a prayer. In this prayer people invite Jesus to come into their hearts. In their understanding this prayer is the full Biblical method by which one is made a Christian. This specific method of becoming a Christian is a recent practice, not commonly followed until recent times (starting in the early 1800s).<sup>19</sup> It is now standard teaching among most Bible believing Protestants (Evangelicals). It has been made very prominent since Campus Crusade's Bill Bright popularized the Four Spiritual Laws in the middle of the twentieth century.

There is much to commend in this approach. Too often traditional churches miss the Biblical emphasis on a personal relationship with God through trusting Jesus in our hearts. We do not hear enough of the central Biblical teaching that we are saved by grace through personal faith. One can easily be drawn into accepting the sinner's prayer or simply asking Jesus into one's heart as being the full Biblical way to become a Christian. After all, we know there is one scripture which points to something similar to this. Romans 10:10 says: "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." Such a confession is a good thing, in and of itself, even if it is done apart from baptism, as the Bible teaches.

But is it best to stop there? Is the sinner's prayer the full Biblical response? Many Protestant Reformers and Evangelicals rejected the role of baptism in personal conversion in a reaction to the legalistic view of baptism by Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches (and some Churches of Christ in recent times). These people rightly wanted to emphasize the elements of grace and personal faith as the basis of salvation.

For our part, we are glad to know that personal faith is the central issue and that God looks at the heart. We are thankful for anyone who teaches this, even when it may not be taught with an appeal for baptism. However, there are no examples of anything like the sinner's prayer in all the conversions recorded in the book of Acts. The whole New Testament (including Acts) repeatedly teaches us that baptism is the full mode or method of expressing personal faith in Jesus Christ to become a Christian. This is the position to which we are committed.

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<sup>19</sup> *Baptism and the Remission of Sins.*

But for us it is another thing to say “a follower of Christ cannot be saved unless he or she has been properly baptized.” To hold such a view, one must discount central elements of Biblical teaching and the work of God’s Spirit:

- One must reject faith as the central and essential human response to God’s Grace (John 3:16; Romans 3:25; Romans 10:9–10; Ephesians 2:8–9). Although important, we believe that baptism is not on the same level, it is a secondary matter of God-given methodology for the purpose of expressing this faith. The Bible repeatedly teaches that salvation is by grace through faith.
- One must minimize the Biblical teaching that God looks at the heart to see what is most fundamental and essential in our motivations as we respond to his Grace (1 Samuel 16: 8; Acts 15:7–8). We believe God weighs the motives of the heart and central intentions as being more important than external religious ordinances, although both are important (Matt. 23:23; Mark 2:23–28; etc.).
- One must discount the Biblical teaching on the nature and work of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. One must advocate that countless millions of devoted, but un-immersed followers of Christ throughout history have been deceived in their belief that the Spirit of God has in-dwelt and sealed them as his own. One must also hold that the majority of Christ’s followers in the present have also been deceived about the Spirit’s work in their lives and about their relationship with God through Him. It would mean the majority of Christ’s followers at present and in history are lost.<sup>20</sup> This horrifying view not only denies God’s promises, but it calls into question God’s goodness and providence.
- One must put undue emphasis and weight on the act of baptism. This would cause people to rely upon their baptism, something which they have done, as opposed to a complete reliance on Christ’s blood.

God ordained forms, methods, and rituals are important, but as even the Old Testament makes clear, God’s gifts and acceptance of human faith is not strictly bound to proper

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<sup>20</sup> The un-immersed include people like Martin Luther and John Wesley in former times, and C. S. Lewis and John Stott in more recent times. Alexander Campbell emphatically stressed this point to the people of a legalistic bend in Restoration Movement, see “Lunenburg Correspondence,” *Mil-lennial Harbinger*, July 8, 1837.

modes.<sup>21</sup> The substance of personal faith is far more important than the fullness of a proper external form given as the means to express this faith.<sup>22</sup> We want to carefully practice what God has instituted about baptism, but the ultimate evidence or sign that God has made someone a Christian is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Biblical teaching and experience indicate that God's saving power is not limited to proper baptism.

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<sup>21</sup> There is the biblical example of the Spirit coming to people who did not follow the proper form. Eldad and Medad did not appear with the other elders before God as prescribed, but God sent his Spirit upon them anyway (Number 11:24–30). Later on Hezekiah stirred a religious revival. He called the people to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, even though it could not be done properly. First, no one was ceremonially clean and prepared to take it. Secondly, they had to take it one month later than prescribed. Hezekiah prayed for the people. He said, “May the Lord, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God — the Lord, the God of his fathers — even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.” The Bible says, “And the Lord heard Hezekiah” (2 Chronicles 30:18–20).

<sup>22</sup> It is important to not confuse the form of the response (baptism) and the substance of the response (faith). Both are not equal or essential. The substance is the essential element.





photo by Morgan Sessions



**11.**

The indwelling  
Holy Spirit is the  
essential mark of  
salvation.



**A**lthough they are closely related in the Bible, the indwelling Holy Spirit is the essential mark of salvation, not water baptism.

And now you also have heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. This is just one more reason for us to praise our glorious God.

**Ephesians 1:13–14 (NLT)**

But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them are not Christians at all.

**Romans 8:9 (NLT)** (See also 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; 1 John 3:24; 4:13)

Biblical Scholar Gordon Fee puts it this way:

For Paul the reception of the spirit is the *sine qua non* of Christian life. The Spirit is what essentially distinguishes believer from nonbeliever; the Spirit is what especially marks the beginning of a Christian's life (Galatians 3:2–5); the Spirit above all is what makes a person a child of God.... For Paul therefore to “get saved” means first of all to “receive the Spirit.”<sup>23</sup>

It is helpful to summarize the work of God's Indwelling Spirit so that we can assess whether or not it truly dwells within. It is surely wisest to look at a composite picture of the indwelling work of the Spirit, not just to focus on one aspect.

A person might be deceived about one of the works of the indwelling Spirit, but not His work as a whole or the end result of His work. There are at least eight elements which result from the Holy Spirit's inward ministry.

- God's indwelling Spirit enables people to truly grasp and embrace the core truth of the cross. (1 Corinthians 2:12–15; 1 John 2:20–27).

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<sup>23</sup> Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 178, 855.



- God's indwelling Spirit inspires people to say with personal commitment: "Jesus is Lord." (1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:1–3).
- God's indwelling Spirit witnesses in the inner being that a person is truly God's child.<sup>24</sup>

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family — calling him "Father, dear Father." For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children.

**Romans 8:14–16 (NLT)** (see also Galatians 4)

The un-immersed and great Christian leader John Wesley described it this way:

By the "testimony of the Spirit" I mean an inward impression of the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God,

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<sup>24</sup> For the historical and ecumenical consensus in support of our position, see Thomas C. Oden, *Life In The Spirit Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 170 ff. Biblical Scholar Gordon Fee makes the following comment: "That is, as we cry 'Abba' ('dear father') to God, we do so in full awareness that we are God's children, but we are also aware that we do so by the Spirit who has preceded us by giving us birth and now prompting our cry — by inspiring us to cry 'Abba–Father,' the Spirit of God thereby bears with us (= our own spirits) that we belong to God as his children." (*God's Empowering Presence*, 567–568).

that “Jesus Christ hath loved me and given himself for me”, that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.<sup>25</sup>

- God’s indwelling Spirit leads people to dwell upon Christ (Ephesians 4:16–18).
- God’s indwelling Spirit leads people into a righteous moral lifestyle (Romans 8:9–17; Galatians 5:16–26).
- God’s indwelling Spirit prompts inner joy, peace, and hope through faith in Christ. (Romans 14:17; Romans 15:13).
- God’s indwelling Spirit gives people unique abilities for ministry in the church (Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:8–29; 1 Peter 4:10–11).
- Most significantly, God’s indwelling Spirit produces the fruit of true Christ-likeness.

And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory.

### **2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)**

But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

### **Galatians 5:22–25 (NLT)**

This composite and the fruit of Christ-likeness is not produced by human power. And it is not produced by Satan, for he is not in the business of humbling us before God, drawing us to Christ, softening our hearts continuously before God, and enabling us to become like Christ and love as He did.<sup>26</sup>

It was recognition of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which convinced Peter and the Jerusalem council that God had accepted Cornelius and his household, even before they had been baptized. Peter stated the matter this way:

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<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Albert C. Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 1:287.

<sup>26</sup> Barton Stone stressed this point to the more legalistic people in the Restoration Movement. See Leonard Allen’s chapter entitled, “Who Is a Christian,” in *Distant Voices* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1993).

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

**Acts 15:8–9**, emphasis mine

Thus, there are three essential qualities we look for in followers of Christ:

- genuine repentant faith in Jesus Christ as the basis of one's salvation
- the indwelling Spirit's work, including the subjective testimony of God's Spirit within affirming that one is a child of God
- most importantly the emerging objective fruit of the Holy Spirit transforming one's life into the likeness of Christ

Such people have been saved and should be recognized as Christians by all followers of Christ.

In short, the paramount test or sign that God has saved those who trust Christ and has made them his own is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

“

We may never be martyrs but we can die to self, to sin, to the world, to our plans and ambitions. That is the significance of baptism; we died with Christ and rose to new life.

”

**Vance Havner**



photo by André Freitas

A warm, slightly blurred photograph of a wooden table. On the table are several white mugs with black handles and rims, and a clear glass shaker with a silver lid. The background is out of focus, showing more of the table and some indistinct shapes.

**12.**

Biblical baptism is  
an important prac-  
tice for this local  
church.



We often have opportunity to talk about baptism with un-immersed followers of Christ. When this happens we see ourselves in a role similar to Priscilla and Aquilla in Acts 18:24–26.

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

If a follower of Christ has not been immersed as an expression of trust and commitment to Jesus, like Priscilla and Aquila we want to explain to them the “way of God more adequately” in regard to baptism.

We want to affirm all that is right in regard to their life with Christ and his teachings. We even look to learn from them. Yet, when the opportunity presents itself, we want to encourage them to consider the Biblical teaching on this point.

We also see ourselves as approaching this matter as Peter did in Acts 10. Peter saw that God had given his Spirit and salvation to Cornelius’s household apart from baptism (Acts 10:44–48; 15:7–9). Peter rejoiced, but he still insisted that they be baptized in water, because this was the full response God wanted.

The Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

**Acts 10:47–48**

Similarly, we rejoice in the presence of personal faith and the indwelling Holy Spirit in an un-immersed believer’s life, but we also encourage them to follow through with the full Biblical response. For us this is an important doctrine.

We join the vast majority of Christian fellowships and churches throughout the world who want people to have experienced baptism before they are granted formal recognition as a member of the local church. For us a biblical baptism is one which expresses one’s personal

trust in Christ and commitment to him through immersion. We believe that it is important to have a united testimony on this point by the congregation to God — for his pleasure and glory in our obedience.

We also believe that such unity is very important for spiritual seekers in our midst. The practice of less than what we believe to be God's best on this issue (or ongoing disputes about it) would be disruptive and confusing. We also know that there are many other congregations in this area who will accept Christians whose consciences do not line up with ours on this point.

Our desire is to be fully obedient to God's revealed will in scripture, while, at the same time, being fully cognizant of God's grace manifested in the followers of Christ around us.

“

Baptism is bowing before the  
Father and letting him do his work.

”

**Max Lucado**





photo by Sebastian Boguszewicz

# Summary



In conclusion, we believe in the priorities of grace and faith when we consider baptism. At the same time, we understand the purpose of baptism in keeping with the classic and historic Christian stance. Our position can be summarized in the following points:

1. Salvation is God's work and is offered to human beings as a free gift — a gift of grace.
2. The basic human response to God's gift is personal faith in Jesus Christ — this reveals itself in the willingness to give up sinful lifestyles and in a personal trust in Jesus Christ as the basis of one's salvation.
3. Baptism is the God-given form or method provided for human beings to express this desire to repent and trust in Jesus.
4. A genuine conversion is the end result of a process which is initiated and sustained by the Holy Spirit, as people make the decision to place their faith in Christ.
5. God's acceptance of one's personal faith in Jesus is demonstrated by the indwelling Holy Spirit — manifested in both the composite work of the Holy Spirit within and by the emerging fruit of Christ-likeness (especially Christ-like love).
6. God intended for baptism to be a part of the conversion process and even the earliest Christian leaders encouraged un-baptized, but saved people to be baptized (Cornelius' household). They also taught that it was important to "follow the way of the Lord" when an inaccurate view of baptism was promoted (Apollos). Because of this, we strongly encourage people to be baptized as a personal commitment to God by immersion. We look at it as an important part of following the full counsel of God (Acts 18: 24–26; Ephesians 4:4–6). If anyone has not responded to God this way, we encourage them to contact the church leadership before seeking membership.
7. We believe that a biblical baptism is one in which a person's most fundamental or central motivation is the desire to "trust in Jesus and follow what he teaches." We want to note that if one's primary motivation is to join a local church, this is not a Biblical motive for baptism. Rather, for us baptism is something people should set right with the Lord as part of being a Christian before or during the time they seek recognition as a formal member of this church. Few people have a full understanding of what is involved in baptism when they are baptized — but God looks at the heart and sees what is central to our motivations. Stated differently, the central elements in

a biblical baptism are the twin desires of expressing “trust in Christ and submission to his command to be baptized.”<sup>27</sup>

Conversion to Christ is not the end, but the beginning of a life in Christ. The goal of this life is to glorify God by maturing into increasing degrees of Christ-likeness. We believe that maturity in Christ, like conversion, is the result of a process (Galatians 2:20; 4:19; 2 Corinthians 3:16–17).



The image of God is the image of Christ crucified. It is to this image that the life of the disciples must be conformed; in other words, they must be conformed to his death. The Christian life is a life of crucifixion. In baptism the form of Christ's death is impressed upon his own. They are dead to the flesh and to sin, they are dead to the world, and the world is dead to them. Anybody living in the strength of Christ's baptism lives in the strength of Christ's death.



**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

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<sup>27</sup> A person can attend all of our Sunday Assemblies, our small groups, our outreach events, and everything except special congregational meetings without ever becoming a member. We believe that membership is a special relationship rooted in commitment and mutual accountability by appointed leaders and members.







**BOW VALLEY  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH**