

# What about Baptism?

## BAPTISM IS...

Christian churches have always practised some form of water baptism. Since the beginning of Christianity (actually before the beginning) water baptism has been used to signify some aspect of belief. It is something all churches and quite a few of the cults which have developed from Christianity have in common. However, there are many different ways of understanding this practice:

- *what* is happening in water baptism?
- *how* is it actually practised?
- *when & where* is it done?
- *who* is it done to and by *whom*?

## THIS PAPER DOES THREE THINGS:

**First**, it overviews every actual use of the word “baptise” (or *Baptizw* *Baptidzo*) and its derivatives in the New Testament to see how they are used.

**Second**, it assesses some current practices of Christian churches in the light of this overview.

**Third**, it sets a direction for OEC to take on this matter.

It is important to maintain a mature awareness of the fact that there are **areas of freedom** in Christian belief. Even tightly held convictions must not be imposed on others if they are not gospel issues. Even if we see someone’s view to be incorrect, if it can be disputed without affecting the meaning of the gospel, we are not to pass judgment on them. That is the point made in Romans 14, where we read **“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters”** (Rom 14:1), and **“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification”** (Rom 14:19).

Unfortunately, the way Christians dispute and pass judgment over different approaches to water baptism has led to strong prejudice and friction, and mutual edification is forgotten. As a result, some people have actually suggested that water baptism is something which symbolises the *divisions* in Christianity. We need to be praying that this **won’t** be the case with us.

Since we are an *evangelical* church with a congregation of people from a vast array of backgrounds, this is an important issue. What stance do we take on this subject?

In the 20 centuries of Christianity there has been a great variety of views and practices of water baptism. This variety is seen both in terms of detail and theological thinking. The details change in terms of the timing, the volume of water and the way the water is used. This is understandable, and



we see the same sort of variety in other church practices and liturgy, for example, communion/the Lord's Supper, where the frequency, the way it is celebrated, the type and volume of bread and wine (or grape juice) vary considerably. This variety has carried over into evangelical Christianity.

Far more significantly, there is variety in the theological *explanation* of what is actually happening at water baptism. Evangelical Christianity cannot accept every single one of the alternatives as equally valid, but at the same time needs to maintain freedom in a non-gospel issue.

Some of the explanations given for church practices can actually work *against* the gospel. For example, the idea that someone is not a true Christian until they are water-baptised in a certain way or the idea that water baptising infants mysteriously makes them Christians. Both of these understandings tend to undermine the message of the Gospel.

We need to ensure that with all the variety, we don't practice what will be unhelpful or unbiblical. At the same time, it is not necessary to insist on a uniform practice in any of these things as long as the variety does not change the central truths of Christian belief.

## **JOHN... THE "WATER-BAPTIST"**

It is clear that water baptism was initially associated with a clear, public confession of sin and repentance toward God. That is the whole point of John the Baptist's mission to Israel. He called Jews back to God. As they turned back, they were water-baptised in the Jordan River.

John's message and water baptism were preparing the way for Jesus' mission. It was not seen as a magical rite or with any power in itself, but as a clear symbol of the confession of sin and change in direction by members of God's chosen nation, Israel. This is emphasised by each of the gospel accounts (*Matt 3:1–10; Mk 1:1–8; Lk 3:1–18; Jn 1:15–26*).

The point of Jesus himself going through water baptism is to identify fully with a sinful Israel. John recognised the irony: *"I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"* Jesus says, *"Let it be so now, to satisfy all righteousness"* (*Matt 3:14–15*). What we have is clearly a record of what Jesus does and says, and it is not presented as a model of water baptism for all Christians to follow.

The water baptism of John is specifically contrasted to the mission of Jesus. John's message sees Jesus in terms of baptism, but not water baptism: *"I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* (*Matt 3:11 cf Mk 1:7–8; Lk 3:15–17; Jn 1:26–27*).

It is interesting to note that in John's gospel, Jesus' water-baptism is not emphasised, while his mission to baptise with the Holy Spirit is. We have John saying *"The reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel..."* (1:31) and *"...the one who sent me to baptise with water told me "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit..."* (1:33).



Here we see that the baptism Jesus is on about is *spiritual*. But despite this, we also know that Jesus (or more accurately, his disciples) continued to baptise other disciples with water (*John 3:22; 4:3*). Little is made of this detail within the gospel account.

## DIFFERENT USES OF “BAPTISM”

Baptism also occurs in the gospel accounts at other places apart from water baptism. It is used as a metaphor for being overwhelmed or completely overcome. In this sense Jesus tells James and John, who said to Jesus “*do whatever we ask*”... “*You don’t know what you’re asking, can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?*” (*Mk 10:38*). He is referring to the judgment he will bear on the cross. This is made more explicit in Luke, “*I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed*”. (*Lk 12:50*)

There are also ways the Greek word “*baptism*” is used to simply mean “washed” or “ceremonially cleaned”. So in describing the Pharisees’ traditions Mark writes “*...they do not eat unless they wash (are baptised). And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing (baptising) of cups, pitchers and kettles.*” (*Mk 7*)

In the New Testament *baptism* is not limited to what we see as the conventional debate that has developed around the word.

## JESUS... “THE BAPTIST”

The central idea of Jesus’ baptism is not one of water. We’ve seen that in John the Baptist’s preaching. Yet we have Jesus in his final teaching to his followers commanding them to “*...go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*”. (*Matt 28:19–20*)

This is where it gets a little bit tricky to determine whether Jesus is referring to a specific water baptism or simply equating someone becoming a disciple with baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and ongoing obedience to his teaching. To put it another way: Is Jesus commanding his disciples to water baptise all the disciples they make? Are “*baptising them...and teaching them to obey*” two extra actions to “*make disciples*”? Or is he saying, “*Make disciples and as you do this, you will be baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey*”?

The two ongoing actions “*baptising*” and “*teaching*” actually hang off the main verb “*make disciples*”, so the command is to make disciples, and baptising and teaching are what happens as they carry out that command. That is, all who have become a disciple of Jesus have by definition been baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit regardless of whether a water baptism has happened or not.



If the baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Jesus is talking about is water baptism, then those who have *not* been water baptised are *not* disciples of Jesus. However, if it is another way of saying “make disciples”, then water baptism becomes a relatively peripheral matter. The central issue is if someone is a disciple of Jesus, they are baptised in the Holy Spirit or overwhelmed by him.

## **ACTS... AND BAPTISM**

As we read the accounts in Acts it is important to remember that they are not meant to be taken as prescriptive. They are just records of what happened. If we were to attempt to take Acts as a book establishing normative church practice we would soon run into all sorts of difficulties.

With the beginning of the post-resurrection account of the church, we see Jesus again contrast his baptism with that of John. Speaking to his disciples he says, *“For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 1:5). This is not to suggest that water baptism was done away with. It was obviously important in the Apostles’ minds, as it figured in their decision to find a replacement for Judas. *“Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.”* (Acts 1:21-22).

After the dramatic filling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter addresses the Jewish crowd and explains that Jesus really was the anointed one, the Christ. He calls them to *“Repent and be baptised, 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 2:38). Although it is not specifically stated, it seems likely that this “baptism” is water baptism, symbolising the new status as forgiven and spirit-baptised people.

Note that if this is water baptism, it is actually an integral part of their response to the preaching about Jesus. It actually falls at the same point in time as they *“accepted the message”* (v41—*although the next report of Peter preaching the need to repent has no mention of baptism*). In short, their water baptism occurred at the time of their baptism into Jesus.

This is confirmed by the accounts of Philip’s preaching to the followers of Simon the Sorcerer in Samaria: *“But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptised”* (Acts 8:12–13). This was significant because up until this point there were no non-Jewish believers. The apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to investigate. It is only after they pray and place their hands on the Samaritans that *“they received the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 8:17). There is no call for another water baptism after their reception of the Holy Spirit. In an interesting epilogue, Simon the ex-sorcerer (who has actually already been baptised) sees this event and wants to *buy* the power to do the same. His baptism obviously did not mean Christian maturity.

The Ethiopian eunuch actually requested water baptism from Philip after Philip had explained the good news about Jesus. Philip obliged (Acts 8:36).



As part of Paul's dramatic conversion and calling, we have the simple report that he *"got up and was baptised"* (Acts: 9:18). This is spelt out a bit by Paul's own account of Ananias' command recorded in Acts 22:16 *"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name"*. Water baptism was again tightly associated with the beginning of the Christian life or baptism into Jesus.

The issue of who could receive water baptism was a real one for the early church. When Gentiles first hear the message of Jesus as Peter preaches to Cornelius and his family and friends, *"The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message"*. Peter sees this and asks *"Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ"* (Acts 10:47–48). Cornelius himself had been told by an angel that Peter would bring a message *"through which you and all your household will be saved"* (Acts: 11:14).

Peter justified his acceptance and fellowship with Gentiles by saying to the Jewish Christians, *"Then I remembered what the Lord had said, 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit'."* The issue wasn't really the timing or type of water baptism, but whether non-Jewish people who were normally cut off from God's people could actually become a part of the people of God. Baptism symbolised the unity *in Jesus* the Gentiles had with the Jews.

The phenomenon of non-Jews becoming Christians and being baptised along with their household or family continues in the book of Acts. So Lydia the Philippian *"...opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised she invited us to her home"* (Acts 16:15). The Philippian jailer believed *"then immediately he and all his family were baptised"* (see Acts 16:29–34). We see here that whole family units become Christians and are baptised together. After Paul's preaching in Corinth we have the report *"...many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised"* (Acts 18:8).

The last reference to baptism in Acts is interesting. Paul meets about 12 men in Ephesus who had never even heard of the Holy Spirit, but they had been water-baptised by John. Paul explains that *"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 baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus"* (Acts 19:1–5). Straight after this, Paul places his hands on them and the *"Holy Spirit comes upon them"* (Acts 19:6).

So they were water-baptised by John as they repent, then they were *"baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus"*. This second baptism does not appear to be one with water. Only after this do they receive the Holy Spirit and also speak in tongues and prophesy, but there is no mention of a third baptism with water after they receive the Holy Spirit.

## ROMANS... AND BAPTISM

In Romans, Paul uses “baptism” in the context of being united with Christ in his death: *“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised 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.”* Paul is writing to Christians and equates their becoming Christians with being baptised into Christ. If this is not the case, then those Christians who never have water baptism have no assurance of resurrection life. This is an unlikely reading.

## CORINTHIANS... AND BAPTISM

The lack of emphasis on water baptism is seen clearly in the next reference to baptism, in 1 Corinthians 1, where Paul castigates the church for the quarrels and divisions caused by water baptism there: *“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no-one can say that you were baptised into my name. (Yes, I also baptised the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptised anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the Gospel...”* (1 Cor 1:13–17)

This is a clear statement that water baptism is not actually part of the gospel message. It is peripheral and not worth fighting over. The real issue of course in Paul’s mind was were they *“in Christ”*? If they were, then they should not be quarrelling over baptism.

The next reference to baptism in 1 Corinthians uses the word to describe what happens to the whole nation of Israel as they pass through the Red Sea on their escape route from Egypt: *“They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea”* (1 Cor 10:2). This refers to their willingness to identify with and follow their leader Moses. Later on we see these same people rebel. Paul then uses this as an example of those who are a part of God’s people still *“setting their hearts on evil things”* (v6).

In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we read of the fact that all parts of the church body, despite their different functions and gifts, have the same baptism. *“For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free.”* Baptism here is again equated with being a part of God’s people.

In 1 Corinthians 15:29–30 Paul again refers to baptism. It is an unusual text talking about *“those ... who are baptised for the dead”*. It occurs in the context of an argument Paul is making for the absolute necessity of belief in the resurrection of the dead. He makes no positive or negative judgments about the weird practice of baptising for the dead. He just points out it would be a waste of time with no



resurrection: *“If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?”* (v29). Paul is not particularly concerned about this variety of water baptism.<sup>1</sup>

## **EPHESIANS... AND BAPTISM**

In Ephesians 4, Paul is urging his Christian readers to *“make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”* (Eph 4:3). This is after he has spelt out the wonderful truth that God has provided the way to become members of his household in Jesus. He then goes on to say, *“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all”* (Eph 4:46). We all have *one* baptism.

What is the “one baptism” that unites all Christians? Well it certainly isn’t the way we practice water-baptism... it *is* what that should point to, the reality that God has acted in Christ. We are urged to keep this unity. To do that is to focus on the one baptism that really matters to us as Christians: our baptism into Christ.

## **COLOSSIANS... AND BAPTISM**

In Colossians 2 a comparison is made between external symbols of being a part of the people of God and the reality, or *“the circumcision done by the hands of men”* and *“the circumcision done by Christ”* (v11–12). Paul says that the *“circumcision done by Christ”* belongs to those who have been *“buried with him in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead”* (Col 2:12). It would hardly make sense if this was referring to water-baptism. The point being made is that just as those who had physically been circumcised were part of Israel, those who are Christians have been baptised—not in an external way by man, but by Christ himself. Real baptism is what happens when we are immersed into Christ.

## **PETER... AND BAPTISM**

In 1 Peter 3:21 there is seen to be correlation between the waters around the ark of Noah and baptism: *“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 symbolises baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Christ.”* (1 Peter 3:20–21)

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<sup>1</sup> The Mormons use this text to justify their belief that they can increase their ranks by baptising others on behalf of dead people.



There is a parallel seen between God's judgment in the flood waters and baptism. Through the judgment there is deliverance into a new life for Noah and his family. The flood waters symbolise baptism, and Peter is concerned to rid his readers of any false ideas on baptism by stressing that it is not in the outward action or the "*removal of dirt*" but in the inner response of faith to God. The heart of baptism is, says Peter, the way we relate to God; with a "*clear conscience*".

## HEBREWS... AND BAPTISM

In Hebrews 6:2, the writer appeals to his readers to "*Leave the elementary teachings, and go onto maturity*". One of the things listed as "*elementary*" is "*instructions about baptisms*". We don't know very much about what these instructions were, but we do know that they were not really a hallmark of maturity in Christ. The rest of Hebrews talks about the certainty of God's promise because of what Christ has already done.

Hebrews 9:10 also mentions "*baptisms*", in the context of the external, ceremonial, symbolic actions of the old covenant: "*various ceremonial washings (the actual word used is "baptisms") external regulations applying until the time of the new order*". No doubt this use of the word "baptism" is referring to the ceremonial cleaning required in the Levitical Law (for example Lev 13 & 14).

## WHICH MODEL?

That brings us to the end of our overview of the New Testament use of the word "*baptism*". It will be obvious that it is certainly not a cut and dry matter. The word "baptism" is used differently in the gospels, Acts and epistles. Water baptism is never actually explained comprehensively. It is just described as happening and without great detail.

In this overview of "baptism" it is clear that there is not just one model of water baptism. There are big differences in the way water baptisms occurred in different situations. Sometimes water baptism happens *before* the Holy Spirit is received, sometimes *after*. Water baptism is never any guarantee that the person undergoing it is a Christian.

There are no details given about the amount of water or the method of water baptism. Sometimes it is received by a single person, sometimes a group, sometimes men, sometimes women, sometimes men and women, sometimes a whole family. Infants are never specifically mentioned, either as *not* being able to go through water baptism or as actually going through it. What we can say is that the household and family texts leave it as a real possibility.

The whole point of "baptism" however is highlighted as the state of being "*in Christ*" and is spiritual, rather than a physical event involving water. This is an important point to note. The focus of the New





Testament teachings on baptism is not the details of water baptism (as we have seen above) but the reality of the Christian person's baptism *into* Christ.

With this in mind, it is understandable that churches have developed a number of practices of water baptism. That is not the problem so much as the attempts to justify or prove one model over another. This process leads to exclusivism on a peripheral point at the expense of a central one.

The one test all models of water baptism must pass is whether or not they become a barrier to the true gospel message, which is at the heart of our spiritual baptism.

### **FOR BELIEVERS...**

The approach of believers' baptism is commendable in that it ties in with the idea of the spiritual baptism. There can be no serious doubt about the helpfulness of this model on the basis of the New Testament. Indeed, as we have seen, to believe the message is to be "baptised" into Christ in the spiritual sense. If a water baptism can physically symbolise this reality, then it is not unbiblical or unhelpful.

According to the texts, water baptism often occurred about the same time as believing the message. This is where most modern practices are very different—we often wait for a period of years after conversion before even thinking about water baptism. This is no problem in itself apart from the fact that what we represent as "*biblical* water-baptism" is not, in many respects.

The idea of someone "believing" in this approach has generally been defined as someone who has reached an "age of accountability". This is not a biblical term, and it begs the question: who determines at what age someone is accountable? Does God only extend his grace to those who can speak? The emphasis falls on a personal confession of faith, which in itself is not unhelpful, but can tend to underplay God's faithfulness.

Another tendency is to see water baptism as a necessary part of the gospel. So after someone becomes a Christian, water baptism should follow in obedience to Christ. It can be misused when the implication is made that those people not baptised with water as self-conscious believers are not in fact members of the Christian church. We have seen that the biblical texts don't allow us to say this.

Despite these dangers, this practice of water baptism is not always inappropriate and not in conflict with the truth of the gospel.

### **FOR INFANTS...**

The practice of infant baptism cannot be ruled out on biblical grounds. The Bible nowhere forbids it and there are texts from which it can be inferred that infants were participants in water baptism. It can be used to helpfully symbolise the truths of the gospel promises for all who believe.



The potential problem with this practice is the tendency to suppose that the water baptism itself imparts or infuses some grace from God. It has been misused in church history and can encourage the worst kind of nominal Christianity: *“Oh yeah, I’m a Christian ... I’ve been baptised haven’t I?”*

But this kind of nominalism can and has occurred in the water baptism of older people.

It seems inappropriate on the basis of the text of scripture and the **principle of spiritual baptism** to water-baptise infants from non-Christian families. The problem is that this has been standard practice within many denominational heritages for many years, and as a result the true meaning of the symbolism has been all but destroyed.

In the case of Christian families, water baptism of infants can be practised in a helpful way which is not in conflict with the gospel. It can highlight the promises God gives to those who will trust Him. In this practice, children of Christian parents may choose to reject the household or family Christian belief when they reach an “age of accountability”. Or they can continue to live in the Christian heritage in which they were raised, and to which their water baptism as an infant pointed.

## **BY TOTAL IMMERSION ... OR?**

There is no account in the New Testament which unambiguously states that any of the baptisms conducted were by total immersion. That cannot be argued with. However, the Greek word **Baptizw** is said to mean *“immerses, or dip, or submerge”*. It also fits in with the accounts of John baptising in the river Jordan. It is also consistent with the Greek language of the classical times, and generally in the Greek of the New Testament. This being said, we still cannot make the assertion that it **always** meant immersion whenever it was used. For example, the references to *“baptism”* in Hebrews 6:2 and 9:10, when talking of Levitical cleansings, make this clear.

It seems likely that immersion *was* the method of water baptism from John on. This is not to say that every other amount or method is inappropriate. Immersion ties in symbolically with the passages explaining the reality of the spiritual baptism every Christian has received in Christ. So the text in Romans 6:3–5 about every Christian’s identification with Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection is wonderfully symbolised by immersion, but we cannot push the biblical text to give us immersion as a *requirement*. Other ways of practising water baptism may still be used without becoming un-biblical.

## **OEC AND BAPTISM**

All of the above are important for us as a congregation. We should always go back to the basics and make our practice reflect what we find in God’s Word. We can tolerate different practices as long as they don’t pull us away from central gospel truth.



As we do that, the real heart of baptism will remain our focus and we will be defined as a church by the important truths that water baptism merely points to, rather than being defined by peripheral details that the Bible doesn't even discuss.

We need to understand and accept that there can be a variety of water baptismal practices. It all comes down to being willing to tolerate others doing things in a different way. That is precisely what makes water baptism into a "*disputable matter*"; there are so many possible methods. There is no call to give up your commitment to one method in favour of another, but there is a call to bear with the person who has another opinion.

It is clear that the water baptism of infants of Christian parents can be done in a way that is helpful. It can also be done in a very *unhelpful* way. There is both good and the bad practice in this area.

At OEC, we water-baptise those people who have become Christians later in life who have not yet been water baptised. This is typical of mission situations where people are exposed to the message of Jesus for the first time. In Orange, we come across many people who fall into this category. This means we give people the opportunity for water baptism after they have turned to Christ for forgiveness and to follow him.

If people who become Christians want to a full immersion baptism, we will accommodate them. This is a not uncommon practice at OEC. The symbolism is graphic. If people have never had a meaningful Christian water baptism, what better way of symbolising their new life in Christ?

Rather than weakening our stance on the Bible and evangelical witness, recognising variety more accurately reflects the scriptural teaching on baptism and highlights the unity all evangelicals have in our "*one baptism*" in Christ.

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