

SESSION 6 • Water Baptism — What it is and isn't

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Life Bible Ministry

Hello and welcome to session number 6 in our study of Knowing what you Believe. This time we're talking about Water Baptism — What it is and what it isn't.

I have to be frank with you from the get go of this study and tell you that whenever you look into the topic of water baptism in the Bible, there's plenty of passages that mention it, but there is no one single passage in the Bible that sets out to say, this is the meaning of water baptism.

We have to instead go into the Scriptures, look at really everything that is said about water baptism as it relates to our salvation, and we have to deduce that meaning. In other words, we have to take a whole Bible approach to understanding the idea of water baptism.

Whenever something in the Bible, a topic, like water baptism, is not incredibly clear, or whenever there seem to be gaps in certain specific details about water baptism or any other topic, human nature is such that we just tend to rush in and try to fill in the blanks. And that's one of the reasons there are so many debates that have raged over the years about water baptism and how it ought to be done.

For example, should infants be baptized in water? Who can perform water baptisms? Should baptism be by sprinkling or pouring? Or by immersion? Is baptism purely symbolic or is it required in order for a person to be saved? Should we baptize in the name of Jesus or should we baptize as Jesus said, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Those are just some of the debates that have raged for years and frankly have separated whole groups of people over their different interpretations and conclusions related to those questions. So it can be a very difficult study. I mean, Christians have divided for centuries on many of these questions.

So we're going to take a look at what the Bible does say, and we're going to do our best to work through some of these issues.

In this session, I'm going to do my best to pull out what I believe are some of the most critical questions about water baptism, and we're actually going to look at those questions, and then find the answers that are appropriate.

Let's get started. How is the baptism of John related to Christian water baptism?

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When brand new believers begin to read through the Bible, it doesn't take long when they're reading through the New Testament, to run into the issue of water baptism. And of course, the first reference to water baptism is the baptism that John the Baptist performed in the Jordan River.

And so the question is, what connection does that baptism have to do with Christian baptism? Well, the fact of the matter is it has very little, if anything, to do with Christian baptism because John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. And it was specifically targeted to the people of Israel so that they might be aware and able to receive the message of their long awaited Messiah.

We find these truths in the Bible. Let me show you. First from Acts chapter 13. It says:

Acts 13:24 (ESV)

Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.

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And then from Luke chapter 7, it says:

Luke 7:29-30 (NIV)

All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John...

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So you can see there that the baptism of John, was a powerful tool that God used to prepare the hearts of the people of Israel to be able to hear and receive the message coming from their Messiah.

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This is a really good question in light of the fact that Jesus never really explains in his dialogue between He and John as to why He was being baptized. All He said was, *"it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."* (Matthew 3:15)

Well, the best explanation for why Jesus submitted to a baptism of repentance is actually found in an Old Testament prophecy concerning the servant of the Lord. And we're told about that servant that, He would be *'numbered with the transgressors; ...'*

Isaiah 53:12 (ESV)

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

That's a way of saying that Messiah would be counted right along with everyday sinners. Even though Jesus never once committed a sin, He came to identify with sinful mankind so that He might become a sin offering for us.

What is the meaning of Water Baptism?

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Well, as we said at the outset of this session, the Bible doesn't give any single specific passage that tells us, here's the meaning of water baptism. But there are passages that speak about water baptism and all that it signifies. And it centers around the word baptism or baptize. You see in the Greek, the word is baptizō. and it means to dip or to immerse.

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Now I want you to think about that idea of, immerse because in Romans chapter 6, Paul used that idea to talk about those who come to faith in Jesus Christ. Let me show you. Paul wrote:

Romans 6:3-4 (ESV)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

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Now, here's the important part about this passage. Paul uses the word, baptized several times, but he's not necessarily talking about water baptism. You learn that as you read the passage and you see that he wrote things like, when you were baptized, you were baptized into His death.

Well, I remember when I was baptized in water and there was no death that went on during that water baptism. You see, Paul is talking about something deeper than simply the picture of water baptism. He's talking about what happens spiritually when we come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Remember, the Greek word is baptizō and it means immersed. So let's read this passage from Romans 6 one more time, and let's put the word immersed into the passage in place of the word baptized. I think you'll see what Paul is really saying in this passage.

Romans 6:3-4 (ESV)

Do you not know that all of us who have been IMMERSED into Christ Jesus were IMMERSED into his death? We were buried therefore with him by IMMERSION into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

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You see what Paul is talking about here is not the physical act of water baptism. He's talking about the reality of what it means to be immersed into the person of Jesus Christ when we come to Him by faith. The result of being immersed into Jesus and His death, is that we are then raised spiritually to live a new life. You see, water baptism is a picture of being immersed into Christ.

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Well, this is the elephant in the room, isn't it? I mean, this is the big question that most people are concerned about, and this is where the debate is most fierce. Is water baptism a requirement for salvation and why are there so many verses in the Bible that seem to lead us to that conclusion?

Well, first of all, the belief that water baptism is required is called Baptismal Regeneration. And that simply means that you are regenerated or born again when you are baptized in water.

And when you read through the New Testament, there's no question about the fact that the New Testament authors closely associated the idea of water baptism with salvation. That is clear. The result for you and me are several Bible passages that might lead you to conclude that water baptism is a requirement in order to be saved. And that until someone is baptized in water, they are not yet born again.

Acts 2:38 is one such passage. Let me show you.

Acts 2:38 (ESV)

And Peter said to them, "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."

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This is just one of frankly, many passages in the New Testament that could be seen as supporting the idea that baptism is a requirement for salvation. But here's the problem. There are even more passages in the New Testament that speak of our salvation that make no association with water baptism at all. One such passage is found in Romans chapter 10. It goes like this:

Romans 10:9-10 (ESV)

...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Did you see there? No mention of water baptism at all. If it was an absolute requirement, would the apostle Paul have left it out of that particular passage?

Those who embrace baptismal regeneration also are forced to grapple with some passages that seem to speak against the idea that water baptism is a requirement. One of those is found in Acts chapter 10.

You'll remember that at the preaching of Peter Cornelius and his entire household accepted and responded to the Gospel by faith, by receiving the Holy Spirit, and then they were baptized.

You also have the statement made by the apostle Paul in one Corinthians chapter 1. It goes like this:

Corinthians 1:17 (ESV)

...Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

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People, if water baptism was a requirement for salvation, this would be a shocking statement by the apostle Paul. Paul would be admitting that he had been sent out without being able to be the closer; the one who truly brought people to a place of being born again. That is, if you believe in baptismal regeneration.

The problem is this. You can't take just this verse or just this passage, or some that seem to say this, and some to seem that, say that. You have to take the whole Bible as a complete revelation and that is the important element of understanding water baptism. Truly understanding what God's intentions were.

When we begin to look at the whole context of God's revelation in the Bible, we find that there are certain other passages where water baptism couldn't possibly be a requirement. Such as Paul's statement in Ephesians chapter 2:

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)

...by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

...by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

In that single verse alone, the apostle Paul used 6 different ways to emphasize that our salvation is not a result of anything but faith. Only faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

And that leads me to conclude that water baptism is a picture of our immersion into Christ.

I want you to think about it for a little bit, because to believe that water baptism is required to be saved, is really no different than the belief by some that we're saved when we take communion. I've talked to some people and asked them, when did you get saved? And I was told by one individual, the very first time I received communion, that's when I was saved.

This person believed that by taking in those elements; the bread and the cup, that they were saved. But you see, communion is really just like water baptism. It's a picture of what Jesus did for us, but it's not the reality of what He did.

Believing that communion in and of itself has the ability to save us, is to elevate the picture above the reality. And it's the same thing with water baptism. That too is a picture. A picture that was never meant to be elevated above the means by which we are saved, which is the cross of Christ.

Who should be baptized in water?

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Well, this one's easy because Jesus told us who should be baptized in water in what we call the Great Commission, which is at the very end of the Gospel according to Matthew. Let me show you.

Matthew 28:19 (ESV)

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

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So you read that passage and it's abundantly clear. Who are we to baptize? He says:

Matthew 28:19 (ESV)

*“Go therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”*

*“Go... and **make disciples**..., **baptizing them**...”* We are to baptize disciples. We first make disciples, then we baptize them.

What about baptizing infants?

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Well, all I can really tell you about this question is that the Bible says nothing about baptizing babies. Frankly, the practice of baptizing infants grew from an unhealthy and unbiblical view of water baptism as a requirement for salvation. And so people began to baptize their babies and they had different beliefs.

Some believed that if their child somehow died before the age of accountability, the water baptism would guarantee that they would go to heaven. Others believed that water baptism was a guarantee for later on in life, they would in fact, come to the Lord, if we baptize them as babies.

And some probably do it merely out of tradition, really believing nothing at all about its efficacy, or power to change that child's life. But there is nothing, not one word in the Bible about baptizing babies.

Are there specific words that should be spoken during a baptism?

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Well, once again, Jesus told us in the Great commission, to baptize *“disciples in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

Matthew 28:19 (ESV)

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

However, if you read Acts chapter 2, you hear Peter saying this: *“And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...”*

Acts 2:38 (ESV)

And Peter said to them, “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.”

So you have these two different passages that seem to give two different formulas. So who's going to win? Well, there have been debates raging about it for centuries.

Here's the deal. Neither Jesus nor Peter was giving a formula, because when the Bible says that we are to baptize in the name of someone. Or frankly, when the Bible says you're to do anything in the name of someone, it simply means in the authority of that person.

So Jesus was saying, go and baptize in the authority of the Father, which is also the authority of the Son, and also the authority of the Holy Spirit.

When Peter said, be baptized in the name of Jesus, he was referring to the one who told him to go and baptize in the name and authority of God.

So they were saying the same thing, that we are to baptize in the authority that God has given us. It's not a formula and the debates are ridiculous.

Thanks so much for joining us for this session.

Next time, we're going to be talking about a very important understanding from the Word of God. It's all about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Until then, God bless you.