

# A STUDY ON WATER BAPTISM



by Dale Rumble

If we count the number of times that water baptism is mentioned in the New Testament, it becomes apparent because of the many references that we must consider it important. However, if we also search the Old Testament we would not find it mentioned even once. We might well ask, if it is important, why was it not present under the Abrahamic covenant? A study of scripture will reveal that water baptism is presented to believers as a *command*, not an option, and therefore is indeed important. Furthermore, it can be shown that the basis for water baptism is found in the cove-

nant made with Abraham; the covenant that undergirds God's relationship with His people in both Old and New Testaments.

## BAPTISM IN THE GOSPELS

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The era of the New Testament began very dramatically; after a period of many years without a word from God, suddenly out of the desert places, there was heard the loud clear voice of a prophet proclaiming the ways of the Lord. It was John the Baptist, calling the nation of Israel to repentance. His message was not based on tradition, for he did not direct them to the Temple to offer more or better animal sacrifices. Instead, he focused on the state of their hearts; in essence he said: "repent and get right with God." His message of repentance was the first step of redemption, and is the basis for all New Testament ministry. Only if their heart attitude was right, could Israel receive the person and ministry of their Messiah, and John came to prepare His way. He was the first voice proclaiming the new, unfolding covenant relationship that God would establish with men through His Son.

Malachi and Isaiah prophesied of John:

*Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, he is coming. says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:1)*

*A voice is calling, "clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness. . . " (Isaiah 40:3)*

The word that John preached had three major elements of truth:

1. He pointed people to Jesus, who was to be the sacrificial lamb of God to take away their sin.

*Behold, the Lamb of God who **takes away the sin** of the world. (John 1:29)*

2. He made it clear that for Israel to receive their Messiah, it was necessary for them to truly repent of their sins. Those who did repent, John baptized in water.

*. . . the word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the*

district around the Jordan, preaching a **baptism of repentance** for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:2-3)

3. John promised that the One coming after him was much greater than himself, and He would baptize with the Holy Spirit all those who repented and turned to Him.

*As for me, I **baptize you in water for repentance.**; but **He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** (Matthew 3:11)*

These three truths, in essence dealt with blood, water and spirit; the significance of which became clear after the Lord's death and resurrection.

When Jesus began His ministry, the first step He took was to show His support of John, being baptized by him in the Jordan (Matthew 3:12-15). In this way He provided a continuity between John's ministry and His own. Although He was much greater than John, yet His words expressed the same principles. Throughout the period He preached, which is recorded for us in the gospels, those who received His words were also baptized.

*Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and **baptizing more disciples than John** (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were) . . . (John 4:1-2)*

After the Lord's death and resurrection, He manifested Himself to His disciples instructing and commissioning them to be His witnesses. His final word to them was a command that included water baptism.

*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in (into) the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . . (Matthew 28:19-20)*

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## THE EARLY CHURCH PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

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Having seen the emphasis placed on water baptism in the gospel era, we will next examine the practice of baptism by the church, as it is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. This practice

is the pattern for Christian baptism today. The church was born on the day of Pentecost by the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Many of those present were greatly convicted of their sins. When these people asked what they should do, the Apostle Peter charged them as follows;

*. . . repent, and each of you be **baptized 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)*

It is remarkable how similar these words of Peter's were to John's. Some three thousand responded in obedience to his command, and were baptized that day.

The message of the church was always centered in Jesus Christ Himself and not on baptism or any other sacrament.

*And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching **Jesus as the Christ.** (Acts 5:42)*

Water Baptism became immediately important only when people responded to the message of grace, repented of their sins, and turned to Christ as their Savior. This is very evident in the record of Philip's evangelism at Samaria.

*Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began **proclaiming Christ** to them. (Acts 8:5)*

*But **when they believed** Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they **were being baptized, men and women alike.** (Acts 8:12)*

Philip did not bring the people to Christ and then put them on probation to see if they were truly saved before baptizing them. On the contrary, as soon as they confessed Christ, they were instructed and baptized immediately.

A tremendous example in scripture, showing the importance attached to water baptism, is found in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. This particular eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship. He was now returning home, and was hungry in his heart to know the ways of God. Although there had been other disciples in Jerusalem, the Lord did not use them to lead him to Christ; possibly to better instruct us through the record of Philip's ministry. The Lord directed Philip to leave Samaria and go to a desert road

leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. He arrived at the eunuch's chariot to find him reading Isaiah 53. This is a wonderful scripture, often called the gospel of the Old Testament since it deals prophetically with the Lord's sacrificial death. The eunuch asked Philip for help in understanding the scripture. Philip opened his mouth and, beginning at this chapter of Isaiah, preached Christ to him. It might appear that there was no reason to mention baptism, for there is no record of water baptism in Isaiah 53, and there was no expectancy of finding water in the desert. Nevertheless as Philip preached, the eunuch interrupted and said:

*. . . Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized? (Acts 8:36)*

Upon his confession of faith in Jesus Christ, it is recorded that he and Philip went down *into* the water and he was baptized. Although the message preached by Philip centered on the vicarious death of Jesus, it must also have included the command to be baptized in water. Philip did not neglect teaching on baptizing just because circumstances were not convenient for a baptismal service. Are we as faithful as Philip in this respect?

The first gentiles to receive the grace of God did so under Peter's ministry to the household of Cornelius. When God gave these men the Holy Spirit, it must have been a traumatic experience for those Jewish believers present. They began to realize that God's covenant was being extended beyond the borders of Judaism to include even the uncircumcised. The proper theological position would suggest that they better pray first, discuss it, and research the scriptures before accepting what God had done. However, Peter immediately focused their attention on one thing:

*Surely no one can **refuse the water** for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he? And he **ordered** them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ . . . . (Acts 10:47-48)*

Water baptism was not presented as an option; it was given as a command.

Another example of baptism is found in the ministry of Paul and Silas to a jailer at Philippi. For the cause of the gospel, Paul and Silas had been beaten, and put in jail with their feet in chains. At midnight, while they were praying and worshipping the Lord, an earthquake opened the doors and loosed their chains. The jailer

was about to kill himself since he faced death if the prisoners escaped. When he realized that Paul and Silas were still present, he changed from a man who was about to take his life to one seeking eternal life. His question to Paul and Silas was the best he could have asked:

*. . . Sirs, what must I do to be saved? (Acts 16:30)*

The answer was not, “*Be baptized and you will be saved,*” but:

*. . . Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved . . .  
(Acts 16:31)*

That same hour, the word of the Lord was preached to the jailer and his household. We are not told how many believed, but all who did were baptized that night: possibly only an hour or two after midnight. There was no thought of any probation period, church membership, consideration of the jailer’s religious tradition or anything else; baptism was presented as an *immediate* act of faith that should accompany repentance and faith in Christ.

## REBAPTISM

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Frequently I encounter Christians who question whether or not they should be rebaptized. Some are adults who were baptized as infants, and are seeking to reaffirm what they believe took place then. There are others who previously had been baptized as adults, but did so without true repentance and conversion. Still others are not at peace because they had such a limited understanding at the time they were baptized. There is a scriptural basis for rebaptism. Paul discovered some believers at Ephesus who had followed John the Baptist and were baptized by him. However, there had been no follow-up ministry to them. They apparently were not familiar with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; they certainly had not heard of the coming of the Holy Spirit. In other words their first baptism had been based on promises of what was yet to happen, and not to appropriate what had happened at Calvary. Paul’s words brought these disciples of John to a place of commitment to Christ.

*. . . John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him, who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus. And when they heard this, they*

*were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:4-5)*

It is not necessary to make a great issue of rebaptism. I believe when sincere Christians hear sound teaching on the subject, the Holy Spirit will convict those who need to be rebaptized. If God should so deal with us, we must be faithful to obey.

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## THE NAME

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The practice of the early church was clearly in obedience to Peter's command in Acts 2:38, as well as to the Lord's commission in Matthew 28. It might appear that their practice of baptizing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, was at variance with this commission. However, this is not the case. To be baptized into "the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit" means just that; we are to be baptized into one name that embodies or encompasses the Godhead. "Father" is a title, not a name; the same is true for "Son" and "Holy Spirit." The key is found in the name of Jesus. "Jesus" (which is Joshua in Hebrew) literally means "Jehovah saves." Thus Jesus possessed the name of His Father.

*. . . and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in **Your name**, the name which You have **given to Me**, that they may be one, even as We are. (John 17:11)*

Through the Spirit, all the fullness of Deity dwelt in Him (Colossians 2:9) and He is called by the name "Christ," or the anointed One. He was the only human visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the name, "the Lord Jesus Christ" does embrace all of the Godhead, and *all* authority had been given to Him (Matthew 28:18). For this reason, His name is to be used by the church as her authority for all actions, not just water baptism.

*And whatever you do in word or deed, do **all in the name of the Lord Jesus** . . . . (Colossians 3:17)*

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

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The Gospels and Acts provide a clear picture of the practice of water baptism. However, it is the Epistles that explain why it is

important. Salvation is based on the following three fundamental truths:

1. Christ died for our sins.
2. He was buried.
3. He arose from the dead through the power of the Holy Spirit.

*For I delivered to you as the first importance what I also received, that Christ **died** for our sins according to the scriptures, and that He was **buried**, and that He was **raised** on the third day according to the scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)*

Jesus died with a mortal body, one like we have (although without sin). His body was buried in the tomb where it remained for three days. When the Spirit of God raised Him from the dead, Jesus did not simply regain natural life in a mortal body. Instead, He arose in an immortal body, one with eternal life. He came out of the grave with a new, glorified body; one that, although it still bore the marks of crucifixion, was different. Mary did not recognize Him, nor did the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Jesus willingly shed His blood in death on the cross that whoever will come to Him might live. When I receive Him as Savior, I am forgiven all my sins so that I stand innocent before God. It is His blood that covers my transgressions and sins, that cleanses my conscience and sets me free from the penalty of sin.

God desires more for us than the forgiveness of our sins. He wants to change us so that we do not continue in sin, and to conform us into His image. More happened at Calvary than the shedding of His blood to forgive sins. When Christ died, our old nature was also crucified with Him.

*Knowing this, that our old self was **crucified** with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should **no longer be slaves to sin**; for he who has died is freed from sin. (Romans 6:6-7)*

For this reason, I am to identify with His death by the “burial of my old nature” so that, just as Christ arose in a new body, I too can come out of a grave of water, no longer under the domination of sin. The step between the forgiveness of my sins and walking in



righteousness, requires the exercise of my faith in putting off my old nature through baptism.

*Therefore we have been **buried** with Him **though baptism** into death, so that as Christ was **raised** from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might **walk in newness of life**. (Romans 6:4)*

In this context, burial certainly means immersion; we would never just sprinkle soil on a dead body if we wish to bury it. The place for faith is great concerning our walk after baptism; just as I must believe that His blood cleansed my sins, so I must also believe that I am now dead to old habit patterns of sin, and can walk in righteousness because He now lives His life in me through the Holy Spirit.

*Even so **consider** yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:11)*

I have baptized a number of believers who, although truly saved for a period of time, seemingly could not give up some sin, or bad habit (such as smoking). Through water baptism, with instruction, I have seen those hindrances disappear from their lives.

*I have been **crucified** with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but **Christ lives in me**; and the life which I now live in the flesh I **live by faith** in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20)*

By faith I see myself having been crucified with Christ two thousand years ago. Although I physically could not have been there on the cross, one thing I can do now is to identify with Him in the likeness of His death through burial. By this act, I testify that I *have been* crucified with Him, and I am now putting the old, carnal nature into a grave of water, out of which by the power of the Spirit, I will arise to walk in newness of life. This truth is so often the neglected key for those who do not have victory in their walk.

*. . . in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world **has been crucified** to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)*

Christ was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit; it is equally true that we need the indwelling Holy Spirit for resurrection life to be visible within us.

## THE THREEFOLD WITNESS

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It is apparent that if we are to fully appropriate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, we must identify our commitment to Him by our faith in His blood, in the waters of baptism, and in the Holy Spirit. These were the three salient points of focus in John the Baptist's message, in the Lord's work of atonement, and in the ministry of evangelism by the early church.

*For there are **three** that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these **three are in agreement.** (1 John 5:8)*

There is an excellent picture of this threefold witness of our salvation, in God's deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian bondage (Exodus 14). Egypt is a type of sin and the world, out of which we have been called into fellowship with Christ. The first step in Israel's deliverance was their obedience in placing some blood of the Passover lamb upon the door-posts of their homes. By this act they escaped the judgment of God's death angel (of course, Jesus is our Passover Lamb). The next act was their exodus from Egypt. As they departed, they were pursued by their Egyptian tormentors and task masters. By the supernatural power of God, they were directed into the Red Sea which opened for them, but closed and destroyed their enemies. This foreshadows water baptism and the taking away of those enemies in our life that had kept us in the bondage of sin. The third part of the picture is how Israel was guided out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and toward the promised land by the pillar of fire and the cloud. God's presence in the cloud provided guidance to His people. This speaks to us of His presence with us, and the personal leading of His Spirit in our lives. Exodus therefore gives a picture of blood, water, and Spirit in redemption.

## THE COVENANT SEAL

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The key to discerning water baptism in the Old Testament is found in the book of Colossians. The following quotation is from the Amplified Version:

*In Him also you were **circumcised** with a circumcision not made with hands, but in spiritual circumcision performed by Christ by stripping off the body of the flesh the whole corrupt, carnal nature with its passions and*

lusts. Thus you were **circumcised** when **you were buried with Him in your baptism**, in which you were **also raised with Him to a new life** through your faith in the working of God as displayed when He raised Him up from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12)

Every born-again Christian is a child of Abraham who is the father of all the faithful. Abraham believed the promises of God made to him, and on the basis of his faith, righteousness was imputed to him (Romans 4:3, 12-17). Through faith, God established His covenant with Abraham; while the covenant of the law of Moses was finished at Calvary, this covenant of faith has *never* been set aside (Galatians 3:17-18). We enter into the promises of this covenant through Christ, who is the seed of Abraham, and we do so on the basis of our faith. The promises were made to Abraham, and to his seed (singular) which is Christ, and by faith through Him to us.

*Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one. "And to your seed," that is, Christ. (Galatians 3:16)*

Now after Abraham believed, God required that he take upon himself a seal or sign of the covenant they had entered into. He and all male Israelites were to be circumcised. This was the seal of their covenant; since the covenant continues in effect, so also should the seal.

*. . . and he received the **sign** of circumcision, a **seal** of the righteousness of the faith he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them. (Romans 4:11)*

Heart circumcision is the New Testament seal of our covenant relationship with Almighty God. The seal given to Abraham provided cleanliness to the physical body, and was but a type or shadow of the spiritual cleanliness that we are to walk in. It is important to see that Abraham had righteousness imputed to him by faith *before* he was circumcised. Likewise, we believe in Christ and receive His imputed righteousness *before* we are baptized. We are a covenant people and the sign of our covenant is to be seen in our *walk* of righteousness.

*But he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit . . . (Romans 2:29)*

The seal of our covenant is not the act of immersion, but the spiritual circumcision that takes place within us.

There are many sincere Christians who seek for victory in their walk through various ways and beliefs. Some emphasize an experience of sanctification. Others look for deliverance from evil spirits, still others attempt to live under legalism, following strict rules of conduct. The true key for victory is our faith and appropriation of what Christ has *already* accomplished for us on Calvary. All that we will ever need is found in His death, burial and resurrection.



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