

# WATER BAPTISM

*Colossians 2:11-13*

## Introduction

Jesus commanded His disciples to,

Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

It sounds simple, but one aspect of the Lord's command has become a source of disagreement among Christians. It is *baptism*. Christians argue about the *subjects*, the *methods*, and *meanings* of baptism:

1. Who are the subjects who can or should be baptized? Many groups baptize infants; others will only baptize adults.
2. What is the proper method for baptism? Many groups sprinkle water over infants or pour water over adults; others insist on immersion under water; others insist on immersion under water three times. Some baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; others insist on baptizing only in the name of Jesus.
3. What is the meaning of baptism? There are those who insist that it is essential to be baptized in order to be truly saved and enter heaven; others say that baptism is *expected* if you are saved but not *essential* for salvation. Still others believe you can and should be baptized for your unbelieving dead relatives – to insure them a place in heaven.

I believe baptism is as profoundly simple as it sounds. But to get back to it's simplicity, we need to address some of the snags that have developed over the centuries since the Lord commanded us to go, make disciples, and baptize.

We'll organize our thoughts around these two points: #1 Water Baptism Cannot Produce A Change In Your Sinful Heart, but #2 Water Baptism Does Proclaim The Change In Your Saved Heart.

## #1 Water Baptism Cannot Produce A Change In Your Sinful Heart

Before he mentions baptism, the apostle Paul discusses circumcision. That may seem odd to you – but it was perfectly appropriate for his readers in the city of Colossae. To us, circumcision is usually nothing more than a surgical procedure we either request or reject for our newborn baby boys based on current medical research.

But in New Testament times, circumcision had far more than a surgical significance; it had spiritual significance.

After God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis Fifteen) He commanded that, as a token of the covenant, every male child be circumcised. Later, during the time of Moses, circumcision became a part of the Jewish law. Circumcision took on a spiritual significance to the Jews. It was the sign of their covenant with God. More than that, it became a religious rite – r.i.t.e. - for them by which they believed they were given a right – r.i.g.h.t. – standing before God. In other words, since you were circumcised, you were saved.

What does this have to do with the people of Colossae? The gospel of Jesus Christ was first preached among the Jews. The first Christians were Jews. These first believers continued in many of their Jewish traditions – including circumcision. But the gospel soon spread from the Jews into the Gentile world. Gentiles were getting saved, **but they did not practice circumcision as a religious rite.**

There arose in the early church a group who taught that, in order to be truly saved, you must also follow certain Jewish rules, rites, and rituals. Specifically, they taught that you must be circumcised in order to be saved. These teachers were called *Judaizers*; they wanted to Judaize Christianity.

At an early church council, in the Book of Acts, it was recognized that you did **not** need to be circumcised or follow Jewish rules, rites and rituals in order to be saved. But that didn't deter these teachers! They went around trying to convince Gentile Christians they must convert to Judaism and become circumcised in order to be saved. These men were in Colossae, and that is why Paul wrote about circumcision.

Colossians 2:11 In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

Paul agrees that you must be circumcised – **but not in a physical sense.** Notice here he speaks of your being “circumcised with the circumcision made without hands.” It is not a physical circumcision; it is a *spiritual* circumcision. It is not the surgical procedure of cutting away the foreskin; it is the spiritual procedure of “putting off the body of the sins of the flesh.” The “flesh” refers to your inward, sinful nature that you are born with. Your sin nature must be cut off by a spiritual circumcision of the heart. This is done by Jesus when you are “in [Jesus].” The phrase “the circumcision of Christ” is not referring to His actual circumcision as an eight-day old Jewish baby. It refers to the spiritual circumcision Jesus performs on your heart when you receive Him into your heart by faith as your Savior.

From the very beginning circumcision always had a deeper spiritual significance. It illustrated the desperate need man has for a new heart. In Deuteronomy 10:16 Moses

commanded the people of Israel, saying "Circumcise then your heart, and stiffen your neck no more." Deuteronomy 30:6 reads,

Deuteronomy 30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

God was always concerned with the heart, *not* with the outward religious rite. The same is true in the New Testament. True biblical circumcision is defined in Romans 2:29,

Romans 2:29 but *he is* a Jew who *is one* inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart...

The outward rite of surgical circumcision is of no spiritual significance. Salvation is a matter of the heart. Paul goes on to say,

Colossians 2:13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses,

"Uncircumcision" meant that they were Gentiles. Like everyone, they were born "dead in... trespasses," **and** they were born Gentiles. They were in double trouble! But by faith in Jesus they were made alive and had received the forgiveness of sins - something surgical circumcision didn't do even for the Jews.

The simple point is this: **No** outward religious rite can affect the inward person. That includes circumcision; **and that includes water baptism**. Faith in Jesus Christ without the observance of *any* outward rite saves you. You are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The moment you add a religious rite – like circumcision or water baptism – you are adding works of outward righteousness and you are undermining the gospel. As Paul wrote,

Titus 3:5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

This helps us to address some of the confusion and controversy surrounding the meaning of water baptism. Since no outward rite can effect the inward person, we can say two things about the meaning of water baptism:

1. It is not essential in order to be saved and enter into heaven. Baptism is an outward rite, and *no outward rite can affect the heart in a saving way*. Baptism is expected, but not essential.

2. It should be obvious that you cannot be baptized in someone else's place, after they are dead. If the outward rite cannot save you, it certainly cannot save anyone else if you do it on their behalf.

Our other questions will be answered in verse eleven, where we'll see,

## #2 Water Baptism Does Proclaim The Change In Your Saved Heart

Paul mentions their baptism, saying,

Colossians 2:12 buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with *Him* through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

If outward rites cannot save you, why perform them? In our case, why be water baptized?

First, you are water baptized because Jesus commanded it. You are water baptized because you want to obey the Lord.

Second, there is a tremendous symbolism in water baptism. It is the outward, public proclamation of the inward change that faith in Jesus Christ has accomplished in your saved heart. It is the outward expression of the inward experience. Charles Swindoll calls baptism a "sacred pantomime... a sermon without words."

What is the symbolism of water baptism? Baptism by immersion is a striking illustration of the believer's death, burial and resurrection with Christ. First, the believer takes his stand in water - an element foreign to his nature and which spells death to him as a natural man. Then he is immersed in this element of death, put right out of sight, buried. Finally, he is brought up from this watery grave by the power of another's arm. Then he lives on, publicly identified with Christ through this act of obedience. The person being baptized is "acting out" his or her death to sin and subsequent newness of walk in Jesus Christ. It is a public proclamation of a personal faith in Jesus Christ. It's as if you're saying,

"I belong to Jesus Christ. I identify with His death for me. And by being raised from the water, I identify with a new kind of life that I could never live on my own, but by His power I will be able to experience. I've been born again. And that's why I want to display what has happened to me already in my life."

It's really just that profoundly simple. And the simplicity of it helps us overcome the other snags in the areas of who are the proper subjects for water baptism, and what is the proper method.

As for the subjects, since water baptism is the outward expression of an inward salvation experience – then only those who are already saved should be baptized! This eliminates infants and young children who cannot yet receive Jesus Christ as Savior.

Why do some – both Catholics and Protestants - baptize infants? One of the Scriptural reasons given for baptizing infants is the belief that, in the New Testament, Christian water baptism has taken the place of Old Testament circumcision as a sign that you belong to God. The verses we're studying seem to link circumcision with baptism. But Paul's point was that no outward rite could save you – you must have an inward experience. He is **not** teaching you to replace infant circumcision with infant baptism.

Another Scriptural argument is that, in some passages in the New Testament, whole households were baptized. Wouldn't that include infants and young children? No, it wouldn't! First of all, it doesn't say infants and young children were baptized. And, secondly, it is said of those in the household that they believed, then they were baptized. Infants and young children who cannot believe should not be baptized.

This brings us to the method of baptism. Is it by sprinkling? By pouring? Or by complete immersion?

Immersion is unquestionably the primary meaning of the Greek word *baptizo*. The Greek language has words for sprinkling and pouring that are never used of water baptism. Obviously total immersion best captures the symbolism of water baptism – being dead, buried, and raised with Jesus. Sprinkling only came about in later church history in cases of sickness when the individual desiring water baptism could not physically become immersed.

How many times should you be immersed? There are those who practice what is called trine immersion – three immersions – to symbolize the triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. An early church rule book, called the *Didache*, states that if immersion is not possible then water was to be poured three times on the head. It does not say to immerse three times in regular baptism, only to pour three times in cases of sickness. Plus, the *Didache* is not Scripture – only an interesting document of the early church. I have no problem with trine immersion, but prefer to immerse only once as our practice.

That brings us to yet another issue: Should you be baptized, as Jesus said in Matthew 28:19, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”? Or should you be baptized in the name of Jesus only as it seems the Book of Acts teaches?

While this may seem trivial, it is not to some groups. There are Oneness groups, usually Pentecostal, who teach you must baptize in the name of Jesus only. What they really mean, though, is that there is no trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They have

the baptismal formula of “Jesus only” because they are heretics who deny the orthodox doctrine of the trinity.

How do we answer the claim of Oneness Pentecostalism that baptism in the Book of Acts is in Jesus’ Name only?

First of all, baptism in the Book of Acts **is** in Jesus’ Name only! But the key is the word “in.”

Acts 2:38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

The Greek word “in” is *epi*, which means *upon*. You are to baptize *upon* the name of Jesus Christ. What that means is simply this: You baptize upon His authority, delegated to you as His ambassador on the earth.

Where did you get that delegated authority? You got it in Matthew 28:19-20 when Jesus said,

Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Matthew 28:20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

So the proper, biblical understanding of these verses is that you are to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit by the authority conferred upon you by Jesus.

The controversies and the confusions will certainly continue. It’s too bad, but they will. Don’t let that discourage you from the simplicity of being water baptized to proclaim the change in your saved heart.

Conclusion

**It’s really just that simple!** All believers and only believers should be water baptized, by immersion (unless physically not possible) in order to give an outward expression of their inward experience of having already been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is indeed a “sacred pantomime... a sermon without words.”