

Baptism Study Guide

This brief study guide is meant to supplement the Baptism Roadmap. Instead of “how to” questions, it’s meant to help you go deeper into a Biblical theology of baptism.

Our hope is that this study helps you better understand what we teach about baptism at FOF. Even more, we hope it draws you deeper into the new birth, washing, dying and rising the Bible promises us in Christ.

The word “baptism”

When people today think about baptism, they often think about someone in a church service who has water poured on them while a pastor says “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

But baptism is not about a church ritual and that’s not what the word “baptize” means.

Our English word “baptize” comes from a Greek word pronounced *baptidzo* (it looks like this in Greek: βαπτίζω). As you can see, the sound of the word in Greek is just carried over into English. This is called a transliteration. A transliteration is when you carry a foreign word over into a new language without translating its meaning. That’s different than a translation, where you carry over the *meaning* of the word. So when the New Testament talks about baptism, English Bibles don’t translate the word. They just keep the original sound of the word without translating its meaning.

Now the New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. In New Testament times, “baptize” didn’t have to have a religious or churchy meaning. It was a common everyday word that meant “immerse.”

For a person living at the time of Jesus, plunging or immersing anything into something else was what they meant by the word “baptism.” Some ancient examples include:

- Washing something by plunging it into water
- Dying cloth by dipping it in a vat
- Sinking a ship
- Dipping bread in wine
- Plunging a sword into someone

There are figurative examples, too, like being consumed by something, being overwhelmed, or getting drunk. (When’s the last time you heard a parent tell their kid, “Don’t you get baptized tonight with your friends!”)

This means an ancient Greek could say something like “Go baptize your hands.”

- Have you ever jumped into a cold pool on a hot summer day, walked through thick fog, or basked in a flood of sunbeams pouring in a window?
- Have you ever felt surrounded, enveloped, or plunged into the middle of something?
- Has your life ever been consumed by something—good or bad?

All of this captures the original sense of the Greek word we transliterate “baptism.”

The New Testament writers liked to take every day words and use them to communicate deep and powerful things about God. They did this all the time. Here’s one example.

Maybe you’ve heard the word “repent.” The Bible talks about repenting and repentance. Maybe you’ve even heard some Christians say that you need to repent.

“Repent” has become a churchy word. But for those first hearers, it was an every-day word. It didn’t have to have a spiritual quotient. All it meant was “to turn” or “turn around” in some way.

As in, “Hey grandma, you’re going the wrong way! Repent that car around.”

So whatever churchy connotations get invested into this word, we have to remember that when the Bible talks about repentance, all it means fundamentally is that we’re supposed to turn back to God.

Our English word “baptize” works the same way. When the Bible talks about “baptism,” all it means is that something is being immersed.

You see this a lot in the New Testament.

- **Matthew 3:11:** John the Baptist says, *“I baptize 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 baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* Now if he meant Jesus was going to come into a church service to pour burning coals over some kid’s head while saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” that’d be pretty weird. Instead, John is simply using an everyday word that means “immerse” to say that when Jesus comes, it will be more than water that people are getting plunged into. Jesus will immerse them into God’s own Spirit and into fire. (I wonder, is that metaphorical like a refiner’s fire, or a warning of future judgment?)
- **In Mark 10:38,** Jesus asks, *“Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”* Now if Jesus is referring to what happened to him in the Jordan River, then the obvious answer is... “Well yes, Jesus.” But do you see how the context intimates Jesus is not referring to the ceremony of baptism (or drinking from cups)? Instead he’s asking his disciples if they really want to undergo the kind of suffering and death he’s about to undertake, because to Jesus, that’s the ticket to right and left-hand spots in his kingdom. In other words, Jesus asks his disciples if they really want to be immersed (“be baptized”) in his kind of suffering and death.
- **Luke 11:38:** *“But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised.”* See the word “wash”? It’s one of the few times the Bible translates “baptism” instead of transliterating it, because to keep it “baptize” makes absolutely no sense if some kind of modern day church ritual is in mind. Even if this refers to some kind of ceremonial Jewish purity washing (which it may), the Pharisees are surprised that Jesus didn’t immerse his hands in water before eating, not that he wasn’t “baptized.”

See what’s happening? You’ll get really confused if every time the Bible talks about baptism, you think of a water ritual at a church service. But if you understand the word to mean “immerse,” things start to click.

Put another way, you cannot understand what “baptism” means in the Bible until you understand what “baptism” meant. When the Bible talks about baptism in connection with the gospel, it means being immersed into Christ.

Where did baptism come from?

Another tricky thing about baptism is that it seems to come out of nowhere in the New Testament. Do an Old Testament word study. You won't find the word (not in English, anyway).

Baptism (as we think of it today) finds its roots in the old Levitical law. Remember all those odd passages about being clean and unclean? Most of them involve washing in some way. One is especially pertinent:

Exodus 30:18-21. Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and put water in it. Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. Whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting an offering made to the LORD by fire, they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die.

Following this is pretty important if Aaron's sons want a low mortality rate.

Here's the set-up. God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt and into the wilderness where they wandered for 40 years. Though the goal was a promised land, God promised to be with them and live in their presence in the wilderness. One way he did this was by saturating his presence in the tabernacle (translated here as "Tent of Meeting") – basically a big fancy tent that the Israelites could bring with them wherever they went.

The theological underpinning is that the Holy and unholy just don't mix. God is holy. Israel was not. So how does an unholy Israelite come into the presence of a holy God without bursting into flames a la *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? God enacted a series of buffers and "detox" points as people would come closer and closer into his presence. The bronze basin in Exodus 30 is one of these.

As the sons of Aaron (the priests—or middle men—between God and the Israelites) would approach the tabernacle and thus nearer to the presence of God, they would have to pass this bronze basin first as a place to get clean. Now the cleaning involved actual washing – it was a dirty, bloody job being a priest sacrificing and burning animals all day. But it was also symbolic. "Lord, cleanse me of what I've done with my hands and where I've been with my feet."

From this, rabbinic tradition states it grew to where the priests would also rub water on their heads and their hearts. "Lord, forgive me my thoughts and my motives."

Eventually the Israelites made it to the Promised Land, and eventually this tabernacle was replaced with a permanent structure (since they weren't nomads anymore) called the temple. But then something devastating happened. In 587 BC, the temple was destroyed.

Now to us the razing and pillaging of a church might seem like a big deal, but to the Israelites, it was an even bigger deal, because the temple was *the* place where they met God. With it gone, so was their access to God... their ability to worship... God's blessing... God's presence. Imagine finding out that you could no longer be in God's presence. Imagine no longer being able to pray to God, and if you tried wondering whether he could hear you, and even if he could that he was no longer with you. If you can wrap your mind around that, you'll start to understand the impact this had on the Israelites.

This forced Israel to re-evaluate and re-interpret everything. They knew from what God told them that God could not be contained to a tent or a temple. Now they were forced to deal with that reality.

What does this have to do with baptism? All those cleansing rituals could no longer be done at the temple – because there was no longer any temple – but they still held a deep place in the hearts of believers. So Jews would still wash to be ritually clean. Furthermore, as the Israelites were scattered into foreign lands

among foreign peoples, those people began to take notice of the Israelites and their God. Eventually some of them came to believe in the Israelites' God too. What eventually developed from Exodus 30 and other temple cleansing rituals was a ritual called *mikvaoth*.

As a Gentile (a non-Jew) would come to the local gathering of Jewish worship held in a place called a synagogue (another Greek word that just means "meeting together") and desire to give his life, love, and trust to God, he or she would first have to be plunged into an immersion pool outside its doors. (Archaeologists have found these – think of something the size of a luxury bath tub.) It would have to be clean water, preferably "living water" (running water, like a spring or stream), and was typically done by immersion. Just as the priests of old washed their hands and feet, these Gentiles would come to be "cleaned." They would then be considered a convert to Judaism, someone who went from darkness to light, from judgment to God's favor, from outside the community of believers to inside the community of believers. Sound familiar?

Enter John the Baptist.

The New Testament says that John came to prepare the way for Jesus. And John the Baptist was controversial. He was baptizing Jews! The thrust of John's message is that everyone needs to repent and turn back to God. Repentance and washing was not just for Gentiles. The Jews needed to get right with God and turn back to him, too.

John drives this home with where he baptizes. He goes back to the wilderness and immerses people in a river. John separates *mikvaoth* from the rebuilt temple and the local Jewish establishment and brings it back to that place where God initially called a people to be his people from a tent. In a time and among a people who assumed that status and ethnic standing made them right with God, this was revolutionary!

Just as water purified someone as they entered the presence of God (the temple) and counted them among the people of God (Jews), so John baptized Jews in water to prepare them for the coming of a greater presence of God (Jesus) where judgment and vindication wouldn't be based on ethnic lines.

John takes *mikvaoth* and applies it to all people, opening the door on what we think of as baptism today. John's baptism is not quite the same as Christian baptism today. Instead it's a prototype of it.

Baptism today

Enter Jesus, who takes John's baptism, and gives it a new tone.

***Matthew 28:18-20.** Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing 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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

For Christians, the practice of baptism stems out of a command of Jesus. It's intimately tied to what it means to be his disciple. And with it comes all sorts of blessings.

What does the New Testament say about baptism?

As Jesus redefines baptism, the New Testament writers spell out amazing things associated with it.

Baptism is connected with salvation.

- ***Romans 6:3-4.*** *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.*
- ***1 Peter 3:21.*** *This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you.*
- ***Mark 16:16.*** *The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.*

Notice how these NT writers make a powerful connection between salvation and our immersion into Christ. Being “in Christ” brings us salvation. Being baptized (immersed) into Christ means his death and resurrection now apply to us. Any judgment we deserve is now crucified with Jesus. Any good favor Jesus deserves God counts towards us. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection he defeated sin, death, and the devil. Our immersion into Jesus means we share that blessing!

Baptism is connected with faith.

- ***Acts 16:30-33.*** *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.*
- ***Acts 2:37-39.*** *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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call."*
- ***Acts 8:12.*** *When they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*
- ***Acts 8:35-38.*** *Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

Notice how the immediate response of realizing the power of the gospel and salvation in Jesus is baptism. Baptism, it seems, is tightly wound with faith.

Baptism is connected with the body of Christ.

- **Acts 2:41.** *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*
- **1 Corinthians 12:12-13.** *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free...*
- **Ephesians 4:4-5.** *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...*

Christ has such an intimate connection with his followers that Paul calls them Christ's body. We are as intimately connected to Jesus as our hand is connected to our body. Which means we're also just as intimately connected with one another.

The New Testament word for this is "Church" – not a building, but a people. We become part of a faith family that extends over all space and time, experiencing oneness with all the joys and responsibilities it bears out.

Baptism is not fire insurance.

Some people think that being baptized automatically gets them into heaven. Nothing could be further from the truth!

1 Corinthians 10:1-5. *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.*

This passage at first glance is a bit tricky. Paul is warning early Christians that just because you are baptized or take the Lord's Supper, this does not guarantee you salvation. The Israelites of old were baptized and took communion too (in a sort of way), but look at what happened to them!

Baptism by itself will not save you.

Ephesians 2:8-9. *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.*

We are saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus. He died for us so we can be forgiven and live. That is his gift, also called Grace. Accepting that gift is called Faith. While baptism can be a way the Holy Spirit comes to us and plants a seed of faith, that faith can be rejected or be allowed to die.

Baptism without faith is meaningless.

Who Should Be Baptized?

There is a big division in Christianity today over whether we should baptize infants or only those who have professed faith in Jesus. Some people try to come up with proof passages either showing how the New Testament never gives a specific example of infants being baptized while others argue it's implied from phrases like "all nations" (Matt 28:19) or "entire households" (Acts 16:31). Both are arguments from silence and seem pretty weak.

The answer comes from a deeper question: What is the intersection between baptism and faith?

With the risk of oversimplification, Christians can be divided into two basic camps: The symbol camp and the sacrament camp.

The Symbol Camp: This camp says baptism shows faith. It's a symbol and nothing more. Think of it like a trophy. Imagine you win some event. As a sign of it, they give you some kind of medal or ribbon. That medal doesn't make you a winner. It just shows and recognizes that you are one.

It would be stupid to buy a medal and give it to someone who hasn't actually accomplished what it represents. It only makes sense to give it to someone who has actually won!¹

The symbol camp sees baptism like this. If we're saved by faith in Christ, then only give the symbol of faith (baptism) to those who have demonstrated that they have it. This is usually done via a public profession of faith. Since most infants don't (or can't) do this, it doesn't make sense to baptize them.

The Sacrament Camp: This camp agrees that baptism is a sign to show faith. But they also say baptism does something more. Explanations vary, but this camp will say that when we're baptized, God actually does something to you. Examples include: brining children into God's covenant (similar to circumcision), giving the Holy Spirit, effecting spiritual regeneration, implanting faith, etc.

If this is the case, it makes sense to baptize children since baptism gives the very thing it then becomes the sign for.

The Use of Language: Interpreting NT Passages

Symbol or sacrament? How does one decide? That depends on how one interprets passages that talk about baptism. Remember Romans 6? Let's take it as a case study. It says,

Romans 6:3-4. *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.*

How do we best understand this passage?

- Does "baptized" here just mean "immerse," as if to say, "Don't you know that all of us who were **immersed** into Christ Jesus were **immersed** into his death? We were therefore buried with him through **immersion** into death..."?

Is the "immersion" in mind not immersion into water, but immersion into Christ through some other means, like faith or obedience?

¹ An interesting corollary is the tendency in kids' sports to give everyone a trophy whether they've won or not. It's generated from the desire not to hurt feelings and to affirm that everyone is valuable and belongs. There are some who would say that baptism is a symbol, but that symbol should be put on infants and children to show that even though they haven't yet expressed faith, God counts them valuable and welcomes them into a covenant with him.

- Is this metonymy?

Metonymy is a figure of speech where one thing closely associated with another comes to represent it. Here's a classic example: "In a press release today, the White House declared..." No one actually thinks the White House grew vocal cords and a mouth and started speaking. The term "White House" represents the president, his cabinet, and the official position of U.S. leadership, and thus comes to stand for it. We do this in faith conversations, too, when we say things like, "I'm saved by the cross of Christ." Really? The actual wood saved you? If so, start gathering shards of it as relics! What we mean instead is that what happened *on* the cross of Christ (that which is closely associated with it) saves us. (See Luke 7:50 and 2 Cor 5:21 for other examples.)²

If it is metonymy, then what does baptism stand for? Repentance? God's election? Faith?

- Or does it mean that when we're baptized (in the typical sense we think about it), somehow God immerses us into Christ and his salvation?

Examples of God working in this way fill the scriptures. Samson gets strength through his hair. Israelites sins are forgiven by priests killing animals. The angel of death passes over houses marked with lamb's blood. God attaches himself to an ark in a tabernacle (and later to a man in Palestine). It's not that any of these tangible things are magical. It's just that God chose to work through them as conduits and vessels.

If so, then what does baptism do? Does it give the Holy Spirit? Does it bring faith?

How you answer these questions will determine whether you think infants should be baptized.

Baptism and Faith

Back to the question of the intersection between baptism and faith. Figuring this out is crucial, but it requires not only knowing what baptism is, but what faith is as well.

People often think of faith as rational understanding and assent. Someone comes to realize that they are a sinner or that something is missing in life. They are taught that Jesus died for them, has a purpose for them, and that they need to believe in him. They do, and most label this faith.

But is faith dependant on cognitive understanding?

And what about an infant? Or someone who's mind has been robbed by Alzheimer's? Or someone with severe developmental disabilities? Or someone who grew up in a culture that's never heard the name Jesus or the plan of salvation? Can they have faith despite their lack of cognitive ability or opportunity?

Think about it this way. Can a newborn child know her mother? She doesn't know her mom's name. She can't tell you any facts about her mom. She doesn't understand the nature of her familial relationship. But at some level, she's drawn and directed to mom, even if it's just knowing and trusting at some base level that this woman is warm and safe and good.

² This is different than Synecdoche, a figure of speech where one part of something stands for whole. Example: "I'm saved by the blood of Jesus." True, but the rest of his bodily death, too. Otherwise Jesus could have just given a blood transfusion for the sins of the world. "Blood" is a pivotal part of his gruesome death, because when you die violently, there's generally blood everywhere.

We believe faith works the same way. Faith is an inclination of the heart that leans towards God and trusts in him, even if that trust exists at what we might call an instinctual level.

Which is why an infant (or any others who are considered “the least of these”) can have faith. Because faith is best understood as trust. And trust does not require being able to articulate the reasons why it trusts. It just requires that you do.

This is what James touches on that gets so many Christians hot and bothered:

James 2:19. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.

James is making a distinction between knowing the facts and trusting God. The devil and his demons know more about God than we ever will. But they do not trust him. You can know everything there is to know about God and not have faith. You can know next to nothing about God and have a faith that moves mountains. (The Greek word translated “believe” is the exact same word translated “faith” elsewhere. Don’t let that throw you.)

Faith does not equal knowledge. Faith encapsulates our entire being and involves the inclination of our heart and will. Despite how it often gets talked about, this has always been the Christian understanding of faith. It’s too bad when faith gets sold short as answering the right questions, saying the right prayer, or making a personal profession.

Because articulating faith is not faith. It is a fruit of faith – a work, a sign.

Living Your Baptism

None of this is to deny that faith should grow. Nor should we ever be content with a lowest common denominator faith. The intuitive side of faith must eventually be fed with the cognitive, or it will die.

Faith is holistic. It involves all of us. It’s not just our mind. But God certainly doesn’t want us to trust him with less than our mind. God values our entire being.

Baptism is a sign of that. It is full immersion into Christ – body, heart, soul, and mind.

Which begs the question. Is your baptism synonymous with you immersing into Christ, or are you just looking for a little water?

Because at the end of the day, God wants you. Not just part of you, but every facet of your being. Because all of you matters to him.

Further Reading

Below are a few papers and books we'd recommend if you want to keep going deeper.

Armstrong, John H., ed. *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Four different Protestant authors present their different interpretations of baptism. After each author presents his case, it is critiqued by the other three. The Lutheran position is written by Robert Kolb, a top-notch guy who gives a good representation.

Gaddini, David. "Βαπτίζεσθαι," Spring 2011.

A concise summary of how the term baptism developed in light of its use in Pauline literature. You'll have to deal with some Greek, but it shouldn't stymie you if you focus. This is for you if you like technical, short, and sweet. Contact Pastor Dave for a copy.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. "The Meaning of βαπτίζεσθαι in Greek, Jewish, and Patristic Literature." 2010. Currently unpublished.

Cancel your life plans and read this immediately. It's that good. Twenty-four pages of examples of how the word baptism was used in the time of Jesus. While it gives Greek citations, English translations are provided with the word "baptize" highlighted. This sucker is amazing. Contact Pastor Dave for a copy.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. "The Language of Baptism: The Meaning of βαπτίζω in the New Testament" in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century*. Edited by A. J. Kostenberger; R. W. Yarbrough. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011.

If the other article by Schnabel gives a wealth of Greco-Roman examples, this one plays it out in light of New Testament examples. Technical, but cutting and insightful.

Ferguson, Everett. *Baptism in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Eardmans, 2009.

A honker of a book, but it surveys everything you'd ever want to know about baptism. Ever.

Haitch, Russell. *From Exorcism to Ecstasy: Eight Views on Baptism*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Unlike Armstrong's "Four Views," this is by one author who traces the viewpoint of eight different schools of thought on baptism (Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Yoder, etc.). It's more interested in what each perspective brings to the table than in debating who's right and who's wrong.

Schlink, Edmund. *The Doctrine of Baptism*. St. Louis: CPH, 1969.

It's old. It's a translation. But it's the classic Lutheran systematic treatment. Be warned. It's thick, dry, and old-school.