

A Corrective Journey Toward Biblical Truth About Baptism

By Kenneth LaPrade

In presenting certain key concepts regarding baptism, it might be beneficial to briefly recount why I did **not** get baptized in water (as an adult professing Christian beliefs) for over 40 years. My enthusiastic, highly “dispensational” group of former years (in the 1970s and 1980s), The Way International, regarded baptism in water as a temporary provision during the fairly brief “dispensation” (or “administration”) of the time of the four gospels - which was sharply replaced by “baptism in holy spirit” as of the Day of Pentecost (in Acts, chapter 2). The reasons for this theological **replacement scenario** were outlined in V.P. Wierwille’s chapter on “Baptism” in his 1971 book: *The Bible Tells Me So*. Although I zealously bought into such **replacement** explanations for decades, I later started to reconsider the entire subject by thoroughly studying **all** biblical records involving teaching points, relevant events, and terms for “baptize” and “baptism.” I now disagree with my former mindset about this vital topic. I also know that there are other reasons why folks tend to chalk off baptism as if it were mere, optional, hollow symbolism.

Dispensationalism itself began in the late 1820s in Great Britain as an attempt to explain differences between God’s dealings with folks at different times. (See The Plymouth Brethren and John Nelson Darby.) Unfortunately, such theoretical distinctions failed to take into account God’s use of covenant agreements. So, in distinguishing too drastically between Jews and Christians, some very unbiblical ideas arose, like a “pretribulation rapture”. This idea speculates a secret “fly by” meeting in the air (using 1st Thessalonians 4: 13-18 out of context) as if it were a prior Christian event, distinct from Jesus’ announced return to earth in Mt. 24:29-31, which states that such an event would be **after** the great tribulation. Thus two very different hopes were postulated: one for Israel (earthly) and another for Christians (heavenly). Perhaps the greatest tragedy about this system is its overt tendency to separate Jesus himself from his all-important words!

In the dispensational style of my former group, as influenced by the writings of theologian E. W. Bullinger, Jesus’ teachings were regarded as an outdated relic of a previous dispensation which supposedly dealt almost exclusively with Jews **before** the Christian era. Consequently, Jesus’ vital Kingdom of God Gospel (Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:43 and over 100 key references in the four gospels) were effectively dismissed as an inferior, earthly hope for limited Israel - a hope which was totally irrelevant for Christians! Under the banner of highly misunderstood “grace”, and according to a twisted version of Pauline teaching (not based on Jesus’ Kingdom of God Gospel) “another Jesus” (2nd Cor. 11”4) was sadly promoted, a “Jesus” who was entirely divorced from

his solemn words of warning (Mt. 7:21-23) as well as his words of promised hope. Such dispensational interpretations wildly bypass the significance of Kingdom Gospel priorities throughout the book of Acts (1:3, 6/ 8:12/ 14:21-22/ 19:8 / 20:24-25 / 28:23, 30-31) and in the whole New Testament.

Just as overall, classic dispensationalism badly distorts the importance of practicing Jesus' life-giving words (John 12:44-50), so the seemingly clever tenets of Wierwille's dispensational baptism - **sabotage** a message of simple **loyalty** and obedience to Jesus' commands. Also, other theological factors, as we shall see, play an insidious, deceptive role.

It should be carefully noted here that **challenging** certain traditional belief paradigms is not a matter of *bashing* folks for their errors or weaknesses. An offer of loving correction (as I myself have received) might save real searchers from dangerously cleaving to wrong assumptions! God's people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, according to Hosea 4:6.

Above I mentioned other "theological factors" which might interfere with understanding biblical baptism. When obedience to Jesus' Gospel Kingdom priorities are disregarded, then human formulae for salvation might be devised, as they were - **enthusiastically** in my old group!

Here is a very brief summary of my former group's thinking: the formulaic use of Romans 10:9 (confessing Jesus as lord - and belief in his resurrection) was taken out of context to promote a done deal "born again" status. (Years later, it dawned on me the tragic irony that one could gleefully say, "Jesus is lord," while apathetically relegating his urgent teachings to an outdated time frame, boldly **ignoring** Jesus' words in Luke 6:46: "Why do you call me 'lord, lord,' and do not do what I say?") After this dubious use of Romans 10:9, one was quickly indoctrinated into assuming that "speaking in tongues" was solid **proof** of having been "baptized in holy spirit", potentially for **all** Christians. When folks were then led into emitting random sounds (through strictly manmade methods), it was asserted that bona fide languages were really being produced. In our giddy excitement (within our dispensational errors), we were actually encouraged to embrace the following arrogant attitude: "If I have irrefutable proof of being 'baptized in holy spirit' (since I 'speak in tongues'), why should I bother submitting to an outdated baptism in mere water?" Honestly speaking, that was my adamant, but misguided mindset - for about four decades!

Now, in summarizing my old group's zealous beliefs and practices in the paragraph above, as a clarification, I would say that not all Pentecostals or Charismatics would adhere to such a package of specific, limited ideas. I only have space here to address a couple of points about "speaking in languages." In **1st Corinthians 12:27-30** (within an emphatic context of the diversity of gifts and functions among individual members with distinct abilities), Paul makes it crystal clear that all believers do **not** speak in languages - just as all believers are not apostles.

Consequently. “tongues” **cannot** be an overall proof of having been “baptized in holy spirit” (in contrast to the 125 year old misleading theory of Charles Fox Parham). Also, as a point of common sense, if someone is **taught** the practice of moving his/her lips and tongue while vocalizing syllable-like sounds (**norms never mentioned at all in Scriptures**), is it not very likely that such utterances will be sheer gibberish?

With certain dire misconceptions corrected, especially while **not** being blindsided by a casual disregard for Jesus’ concerted effort to herald the coming Kingdom of God (Luke 19:11-27), the future arrival of a new God-centered, Messiah-led government on earth (Isaiah 2:1-4 and 11:1-10/ Rev. 5:9-10 and 11:15-18), the waters of baptism become clearer. Before laying out the historical record and the meaning of getting baptized in water - as devoted, repentant adults, I will overview a few key vocabulary concepts and note some often misunderstood passages.

First of all, I will mention that the words “baptize”, “baptism”, and “Baptist” (or baptizer) are transliterated directly from similar Greek terms. Any good, detailed lexicon or dictionary will let you know that such terms have a very **literal** meaning: **washing**, cleaning, or bathing by immersing (or dipping) into **water**. Thus, the terms are not unclear, generic words meaning to “immerse into whatever”, whether it be water, spirit, fire. or suffering. Of course, “baptize” words can be used **figuratively** (about spirit, fire, or suffering) as seen in Scriptures a few times. But if the biblical context does not state one of these non-water (figurative) uses, then the baptize/ baptism terms are **not** ambiguous; they simply refer to being plunged into water. For example, folks from my background, reading Romans 6:3-4 with a vague, generic baptism idea might see that a believer is identified with Messiah’s death, burial, and resurrection - but vastly **fail** to perceive that such identification is linked to the physical, obedient action of being splashed down into water - effectively reenacting Jesus’ accomplishments in a symbolic way. It is very similar to how regularly sharing bread and the cup of wine in memory of Jesus symbolizes genuine faith in Jesus’ sacrificial death - until he returns (1st Cor. 11:23-26). In both practical cases, physical, biblical symbolism is not hollow, but it is spiritually quite meaningful!

Acts 1:5 was the fundamental verse used in the dispensational, baptismal. replacement concept of my old group: “For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with holy spirit not many days from now.” Although we regarded these words as indicative of a **strong**, dispensational contrast, it is interesting that the Greek word for “but” is **de**, a weak connective which is often translated “and” in Scriptures. The Greek term **alla** for a strong contrast is not used here. Acts 1:5 could be correctly rendered: “For John baptized with water, **and** you will be baptized in holy spirit not many days from now.” The same is true of Peter’s alluding to Acts 1:5 in Acts 11:15-16, so the bizarre theory (from my old group) that Peter changed his mind about baptizing believing Gentiles in water (twisting Acts 10:46-48) is truly terrible nonsense!

It was very popular in my old group to state that the use of "one baptism" in a list in Ephesians 4:5 had to be a reference to "spirit baptism" since it is superior to outdated "water baptism." Nevertheless, if one is careful to read the whole list (starting in verse 4), it is obvious that "one spirit" is already part of the list! The list is not being redundant here, but it clearly refers to baptism in the Messiah in water in addition to "one spirit" - as another point of unity.

Jesus' "great commission" command (Mt. 28:19) that people baptize other folks (evidently in water) is often disparaged for a couple of reasons. I will simply mention that listing Father, Son, and holy spirit in close proximity (also done in 2nd Cor. 13:14) does not at all demonstrate a trinitarian doctrine of a fictitious, three-in-one Deity. Also, the "Father, Son, and holy spirit" phrase should not be construed as a word-for-word formula, **contradictory** to the phrase repeatedly used in the book of Acts about baptizing folks "in the name of Jesus the Messiah". Both baptismal phrases are congruent ways of emphasizing the same essential reality. Also, the fact that Eusebius (a church historian) cited this part of Mt., chapter 28 several times, sometimes giving a shortened summary and other times giving a fully worded quotation, is **not** evidence that the baptism command comes from a conspiracy theory to distort the integrity of texts. The old texts of Mt. 28 are all consistent.

The historical record of how baptism in water continued throughout the book of Acts for decades is a testimony to the fact that the apostles and others obeyed Jesus' Mt. 28:19-20 command to (1) make disciples of **all** nations (not just Israelites), (2) baptizing them (folks from **all** nations - not just Israelites) ..., and (3) teaching them (people from **all** nations) to observe all that Jesus had commanded them. They certainly were not to dismiss Jesus' words as if they were the formerly pertinent instructions for a previous (but now outdated) dispensation! Also, it is Jesus **alone** (now seated at God's right hand) who can "baptize" people in holy spirit (Mt. 3:11-12 and parallel records), so when believers baptize other people, it is obviously in water.

Peter (Acts 2:38) spoke to listeners on Pentecost that they repent and be baptized in the name of Messiah Jesus as a **prerequisite** to receiving holy spirit! Baptisms in water in the name of Jesus the Messiah had already been carried out by apostles under Jesus' supervision (John 3:22-30, 4:1-2) since before John the Baptist was arrested! After the Day of Pentecost, records of baptisms in water continued for decades. These baptisms in the name (and the whole teaching agenda) of Jesus were in harmony with Jesus' clear directive (Mt. 28:19) and Peter's instruction on Pentecost that folks get dunked in water in order to receive holy spirit. There never was any contention or confusion about one style of baptism (mere water) being later replaced by another style (superior spirit). Such unbiblical, confusing jargon is totally rooted in humanly designed adherence to a deceptive dispensational scheme.

Phillip's visit to Sanaria (Acts 8) is such a vital record in which he proclaimed the Messiah to them, and people listened (v.4-5). In verse 12, "But when they believed Phillip preaching the

Good News about the Kingdom of God [the same Gospel which Jesus himself had preached!] and the name of Jesus the Messiah; they were being baptized [dunked in water], men and women alike." By the way, "men and women" are people who are old enough to listen to the Kingdom Gospel, understand the message, and "repent" (change their life direction and mental focus). Later on, Phillip met an adult individual, taught him Scriptural truth about Jesus, and then baptized him in water: the Ethiopian eunuch - a wonderful record in Acts 8:25-39!

Other clear, simple records include Peter's baptizing of Gentiles in water at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:46-48) and Paul's baptizing of Lydia and her Gentile household (Acts 16:14-14) and later - the jailer and his Gentile household (Acts 16:31-33) in Philippi (Macedonia, in Europe). Also, it is clear that Paul rebaptized folks in Ephesus who had been baptized previously with only partial information (Acts 19:1-6). After being baptized again with fuller information, they were able to receive holy spirit. So, for at least two decades in Acts (after Pentecost) water baptisms went hand in hand with Kingdom Gospel preaching in obedience to what Jesus had commanded in Mt. 28: 19-20. On top of all this Paul later relates in Acts 22 details of his previous (Acts 9) conversion experience - including when Ananias spoke to him - 22:16, saying, "Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name." Obviously, Paul did not ever view dipping in water as an outdated norm, just as he did not perceive his own teaching as replacing Jesus' "sound words" - 1st. Tim. 6:3. When one then considers pertinent, instructive records regarding baptism in the writings of Paul, Peter, and the author of Hebrews, it is abundantly clear that water baptism in the name of Messiah Jesus has been deeply relevant to all who are old enough to hear and believe the Kingdom Gospel of Jesus - and decide to repent, thus becoming genuine Christian believers.

Is baptism then a ritual to acquire a "once saved, always saved" status? No! One is to persevere in repentant attitudes and actions after becoming a true believer (Heb.3:6, 14).

So why bother getting dunked in water (as an adult) after decades of considering oneself to have already been a faithful believer? Before perusing a few key Scriptures on this topic, I will make a few comments.

Humbling oneself to God in proactive obedience is always extremely beneficial. There is no lasting shame (as I discovered - 10 and a half years ago) in admitting with humility that one has simply been wrong or negligent (perhaps due to ignorance or confusing blunders) for decades! However, one can truly become an encouraging example to others when lovingly taking the plunge. Connecting the experience of getting baptized and the vivid memory of the event - with certain key Scriptures (which we shall soon see) is a powerful reminder to stay on track with the things of God!

I briefly mentioned earlier how baptism in Romans 6:3-4 is a practical, symbolic reenactment in identifying with the Messiah's death, burial, and resurrection. There are more practical detailed factors in the overall picture of chapter 6. Baptism builds on the truth (v.1-2) that we should **not**, by any means, "continue in sin that grace may increase", so getting baptized really involves a commitment not to continue in a lifestyle of deliberate or careless sin. How do we do this? We logically conclude that our old self was crucified with Jesus (v. 6), so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. We consider that just as Jesus was raised from the dead (v.4), so we too might walk in newness of life! In what follows (v.7-23) one sees more similar details: "Even so (v. 11) consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus - parallel (v. 10) to how Jesus died to sin once for all, but now lives to God. The context goes on to show our freedom (and free will ability) to dedicate our body parts to doing what is right instead of going with the flow of old sinful ways.

In an interesting context (1st Cor. 1) about carnal divisions among immature believers, Paul was thankful to have directly baptized only a few folks in Corinth, so they would not think he had baptized them in his name (or his personal agenda: v.10-17). He was content to preach the Gospel while others baptized, perhaps like the example of Jesus who oversaw the baptizing actions of others (in John 4:1-2) Although Paul is clearly rebuking divisiveness, he does not downplay the significance of baptism itself. A beautiful verse in 1st. Cor. so reminds me of Acts 2:38, where authentically receiving holy spirit is a direct result of obedience to get dunked in water. 1st Cor. 12:13: "For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one spirit."

Galatians also reminds me of baptism's role in the spiritual unity asserted and just seen in 1st Cor. 12:13. In the fabulous context of how promises to Abraham (Gal. 3) are now relevant to Christian Kingdom hope, one can view the following in v. 26-29: "For you are all sons of God through faith [or covenant faithfulness] in Messiah Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into the Messiah have clothed yourselves with the Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Jesus. And if you belong to the Messiah, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." The bold spiritual unity of the faithful, the baptized, is a mighty priority over strict cultural and class distinctions in both ancient and modern societies, as we are fellow heirs of Abrahamic Kingdom promises, clothed with (or identified with) the Messiah.

As well as what we considered earlier in Ephesians 4:4-5, Colossians 2:12 has an insightful parallel to the identification theme we already saw in Rom. 6:3-4. Col. 2:12 "Having been buried with him [Jesus] in baptism, in which you were also raised up with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." If we truly believe that God raised Jesus from among the dead - within the umbrella reality of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 8:12),

why not reenact this vibrant Scriptural identification picture by being baptized? The further context in Col. 2 goes on (v. 13-15) to link this picture with vast forgiveness and ultimate victory over evil powers.

There are other aspects of this vast topic that can be studied, contemplated, compared, applied, and joyfully accepted, instead of staying stuck on a misleading bandwagon of defective, manmade thinking: like dispensationalism and a few other “isms”. We will close our study with a brief consideration of 1st Peter 3:18-22; this record leaves no doubt that baptism in water never was despised or displaced among genuine believers.

A separate detailed study could be done, by the way, on the sin of the “sons of God” (rebellious angels) and the rise of the Nephilim (Genesis 6:1-5, Jude 6, 2nd Peter 2:4-5), a topic which touches on 1st Peter 3:19-20. The imprisoned “spirits” here - are rebellious angels who sinned in ancient times before the flood. They are **not** dead humans, who are unconscious and “asleep” in death (not “awake” as disembodied “spirits”).

The context of 1st Peter, chapter 3, in verses 8-17, makes it clear that believers are blessed for doing what is right even if they suffer for it. They should sanctify the Messiah as lord in their hearts and be always ready to give a defence to those who ask them to give a reason for the hope that is in them - with gentleness and reverence. Among these and other wise, practical encouragements, chapter 3 reaches a conclusion, exalting the Messiah’s triumphant accomplishments as beautifully connected to baptism in water!

Verse 18-19 says, “For the Messiah also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh [fully as a human being], but made alive in the spirit [in reference to his spiritual body - after being resurrected - as seen in 1st Cor. 15:44-45]; in which also he went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison.” So, at some point after his death and resurrection, Jesus went in his spiritual body to proclaim his victory to the rebellious angels (no longer free to roam now) who had sinned in a devastating way before the flood: Gen. 6:1-5.

Verse 20 states, “Who [speaking of the imprisoned spirits] once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water.” Then v. 21 **compares** how the eight people were saved through water to how baptism in water saves us nowadays!

Verse 21-22 “Corresponding to that [the saving of eight people] baptism now **saves** you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh [not physical washing itself, but a symbolic reality], but an appeal to God for a good conscience [a matter of devoting one’s conscience to God] through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah [like the identification picture seen in Rom. 6:3-4], Who [Jesus the Messiah] is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities

and powers had been subjected to him.” As we saw briefly in Col. 2, Messiah’s victory over all powers of evil is connected to our being baptized to identify with his triumph; 1st Peter expands the “A to Z” view of Jesus’ absolute triumph over dark powers!

When one carefully considers simple vocabulary meanings (baptize, baptism, etc.) about words for dipping in water, Jesus’ clear commands in Acts 28, the consistent historical record in the book of Acts, the wonderful identification with Messiah theme (in Romans, Colossians, and 1st Peter), the baptism connection with ultimate Messianic triumph, and other details we have just seen, practical application is easy to see. If we have not been baptized as adults, we should study this subject and become convinced that getting joyfully baptized is obedience to Jesus. Then we can help others to perceive the practical importance of this topic.