

Various Uses of the Word “Baptism” in the New Testament

Steve Diehl, November 2014

The Greek word that is translated into the English word “to baptize” or “baptism” was an ordinary, everyday word. It was not a “Christian” word or a religious word or “spiritual word. It had two basic meanings.

The first meaning was “to immerse,” to put an object into another substance, usually a liquid. It was different from the Greek and English words which mean “to dip,” which refer to the act of putting an object into a liquid and then taking it out. “To immerse” emphasizes the act of putting an object into a liquid, without any reference to taking it out again.

The second meaning grew out of the first meaning. The secondary meaning was a transaction whereby an object or person came under the transforming power of something else. For example, washing hands not only involves putting hands into the water (the first meaning of the word “to baptize”), but also results in the hands becoming cleaner than before (the second meaning of the word “to baptize”). In the same way, putting a log into a fire is not only a baptism of the first meaning, but also of the second meaning since the log is changed by the fire and is burned up. In this second meaning no liquid or physical change of position of the object or person being baptized is necessary. All that is necessary for the word “to baptize” to be appropriately used is for one object to be transformed by something else.

These two meanings will properly explain how the Jesus and the New Testament writers used the word. As such, there are no less than 18 different baptisms referred to in the New Testament.

1. In the Old Testament, a Jewish ceremonial (and often practical) baptism by bathing in water to secure “cleansing” and a “right standing with God.”

In the Law of Moses, (see Leviticus 14-17) people were to “bathe” after becoming “unclean” in some way, in order to become “clean” and to be able to participate in the holy activities of the Jewish Covenant.

2. In the New Testament, a ceremonial baptism with water of parts of the body and various objects to remove the “uncleanliness” of the world

“The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of

cups and pitchers and copper pots.) The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?’” Mark 7:1-5 (Mt 15:1-2)

By the time of Jesus, the Jewish leaders had added to the ceremonies that God gave Moses many more of their own. *These baptismal ceremonies were common practices for the Jewish people in the days of Jesus.*

3. A ceremonial baptism with water to cleanse “unclean” Gentiles who wanted to become a part of God’s Covenant with Israel

The Jews baptized non-Jews into their religion and community, along with circumcision, to initiate them into their community. This is why the Pharisees asked John the Baptist the follow question.

“Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said to him, ‘Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?’ John answered them saying, ‘I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’” John 1:24-27

4. A baptism of Israel into Moses

5. A baptism of the Israelites who came out of Egypt in the cloud

6. A baptism of the Israelites who came out of Egypt in the sea

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ...” 1 Corinthians 10:1-2

7. A baptism by John the Baptist in water for repentance of sins

“Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.” Matthew 3:5-7

(Mk 1:5, Lk 3:3-14, 7:29-30, Jn 1:25-31, Acts 1:4-5, 10:37, 13:24, 18:25, 19:1-5)

Which might be more important, a symbolic, ceremonial baptism by water or a real baptism caused by real repentance?

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore

bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, “We have Abraham for our father”; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Matthew 3:8-12

8. A baptism by Jesus in the Holy Spirit

9. A baptism by Jesus in fire

“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” John the Baptist, quoted from Matthew 3:11
(Mk 1:8, Lk 3:16 and John 1:26, 33, Acts 1:4-5, Acts 11:15-18)

10. The baptism by John the Baptist of Jesus in water (not involving repentance of sins)

“Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted Him. After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”
Matthew 3:13-17 (Lk 3:21-22)

11. A baptism in suffering

“They were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, saying, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles. They will mock Him and spit on Him, and scourge Him and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.’ James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, ‘Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.’ And He said to them, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Grant that we may

sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized.’” Mark 10:32-39 (Luke 12:49-50)

12. A baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”
Matthew 28:18-20

13. A baptism in water by a Christian of a new believer, using water in the name of Jesus Christ

“Peter said to them, ‘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. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.’ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation!’ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.” Acts 2:38-41
(Acts 8:12-16, 8:36-38, 9:17-18, 10:47-48, 16:15, 33, 18:8, 19:1-6, 22:16, 1 Cor 1:13-17, 15:29)

14. A baptism into Jesus Christ

15. A baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through 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. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him ...” Romans 6:2-6
(Gal 3:27, Eph 1:3-14 – “in Him,” Col 2:12, 1 Peter 3:21)

16. A baptism by the Holy Spirit into the spiritual Body of Jesus Christ

“For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 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.” 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

17. A singular, unifying baptism of all believers regardless of race, sex, economic status, etc.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” Ephesians 4:4-6

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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 Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:27-28

18. A baptism of Noah’s family and the animals into the Ark for a salvation from The Flood

“For Christ 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, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who 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. Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.”
1 Peter 3:18-22

In these verses, Peter is comparing the saving value of being spiritually baptized into Jesus with the saving value of being physically baptized into the Ark. Everyone inside the Ark, was saved from the water of The Flood,” while everyone outside the Ark perished. Everyone inside of Jesus is saved from sin. Everyone outside of Jesus perishes. Peter here is emphasizing that it is not the water of a water baptism that saves a person (“not the removal of dirt from the flesh”), but rather a baptism which is “an appeal to God for a good conscience – through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”