

Why the First Believers Were Baptized (Part 3)

Jesus instructed His apostles to preach the gospel and baptize those who believed. We can read about the spread of the gospel in the Book of Acts where **the apostles were doing exactly what Jesus instructed**. You might say that these are two witnesses for the relevance for Christian baptism. There is a third.

When the apostles and other inspired writers sent letters to various churches in the first century they encouraged Christians in their faith, reminded them of earlier instruction, applied the teachings of Jesus and provided additional explanation regarding earlier teachings. The Apostle Paul explained the relevance of baptism into 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. —Romans 6:3–5

At the core of this passage is a statement that ultimately comes from God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: *A believer is literally united with the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ*. Of course, this is not literal in a physical sense, but that does not mean that it is not literal. The things that Paul wrote about baptism are literal truths set in a *spiritual context*.

Paul said that the baptized believer is literally united with the death of Jesus. So, it is as if the believer died and was in the tomb with Jesus. Again, this is not a physical truth, but a spiritual truth, one accomplished by God.

In addition, Paul said that the baptized believer is literally united with the resurrection of Jesus. Yet again, this is not a physical truth in the present, but a promise that God will accomplish upon the return of Christ. It can only be understood in a *literal spiritual context*.

The ‘new life’ that Paul wrote about (v. 4) is the result of the believer having died and then being made alive (reborn)...not figuratively, but truly. The baptized believer, by faith in the invisible activity of God, understands that he/she has undergone a literal spiritual change, passing from death into life through Jesus Christ.

Baptism is not a mere illustration; it is not magic ritual, and it is not considered a ‘work’ in Scripture. Baptism into Christ is an *act of faith* in the expressed claims of God. It symbolically parallels the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, but literally *unites the believer with Christ* in His death and in His resurrection by God’s power.

Finally, listen to the words of Peter:

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. —1 Peter 3:21

Of the many things written about this verse one fact is undisputed. Peter wrote: “baptism now saves you.” The Greek text of this statement is unquestioned; its meaning, obvious. It parallels the instruction given by Jesus in the Great Commission as well as the examples of the apostles and first believers who followed Jesus instruction. Baptism is intimately connected to the salvation of the soul. Baptism saves.

The explanations of the inspired New Testament writers stand as a third witness to the vital importance and relevance of Christian baptism.