

# The History of New Testament Baptism

## Class 3

### Scott Taft and Pat Swafford

As we have seen and discussed in our previous lessons, baptism is a subject that must be addressed in one's life in order to become a Christian. The evidence is overwhelming that one does not become a Christian, and cannot belong to Christ until they are baptized into Him. From our first lesson we saw the examples given to us in the book of Acts of baptism. We have discussed what it was administered for, touched on the scriptural method for its administration, and we have briefly talked about the scriptural examples we have of the people to whom baptism was administered.

We have shown through the use of the scriptures that these were people who had heard the word of God, and were touched by it. Then through their belief and faith in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross generated through the hearing of the word, they were moved to repent of their sins, and they obeyed the command to be washed clean by the blood of Christ in baptism, and to commit their lives to Christ and His lordship over them.

Today we are going to discuss the history of New Testament baptism, how the preparation for this essential Christian ordinance was laid down for us in order to see a pattern, how it was instituted by the apostles at the command of Christ for us to follow, and how it has become perverted since apostolic times by the falling away. We are also going to talk briefly about the movement to restore and reinstitute the scriptural teachings on baptism.

#### Preparing the way...

From the time of the ministry of John the Baptist forward, baptism has been a critical feature in obedience to the will of God. We even have examples of "types" of baptism, and types of purposes, from centuries before for us to learn from given in the Old Testament. Paul tells us in **Romans 15:4** plainly, that the things written in the Old Testament were given to us for our learning. Therefore from the Old Testament we learn about these "types" and purposes mentioned before, and we clearly see certain lessons to be gained from the parallels they show with New Testament baptism. These examples are:

- The flood in **1 Peter 3:20&21** in which Peter tells that Noah was saved from the wickedness of his generation by the waters of the flood. He clearly connects baptism as an anti-type of this saving through the flood waters, just as Noah was saved from the wickedness of his world by the flood waters and the ark, so we are saved from the wickedness of the world by the waters of baptism.
- In **1 Peter 1:2** there is a distinct parallel pointed out between baptism and initiation into a covenant relationship with the Lord. The verse has the phrase in it; "**for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ**". This part of the

verse points to a parallel between what the children of Israel did at the foot of Mount Sinai in order to come into a covenant with God, and what Christians now do to come into a covenant relationship with God and Jesus Christ. Both acts involve blood. In the case of the children of Israel, the blood that was sprinkled on them had a singular purpose; to seal them into a covenant relationship with the Lord. In **Exodus 24:7-8**, Israel affirmed their covenant with God by pledging to be obedient to the Lord in all that He had said to them; at that point Moses sprinkled blood on them, and said “**This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.**” The sprinkling of blood initiated or sealed them into their covenant relationship with God **after** their pledge of obedience to Him. Under the new covenant the blood of Christ serves a dual purpose; it seals us into a covenant relationship with God and at the same time it cleanses our sins. In **Matthew 26:28** Jesus tells us that it is His blood which initiates us into the new covenant and that His blood “**is shed for many for the remission of sins**”. After we are obedient to the gospel command to repent, which is a pledge of continued obedience to God, and when we are baptized as expressed in **Acts 2:38**, we come into spiritual contact with the blood of Christ (**Acts 22:16** points to the washing away of sins in the waters of baptism as does **Revelation 1:5**). This shows us that in baptism, we are not only sealed into a covenant with the Lord, we are cleansed of our sins as well.

- Paul’s mentioning in **1 Corinthians 10:1&2** of the passing of the children of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea under the cloud... what were they surrounded by? They were saved by water... they were literally immersed in it! What were they saved from? Bondage in Egypt under Pharaoh, just as baptism saves us from bondage to sin under Satan. When we are baptized we pass from the bondage of sin into God’s care and safety, just as the Israelites were saved from Pharaoh’s army and captivity in Egypt by reaching the other side of the Red Sea and passing under the cloud.
- The story of Naaman the Syrian commander in **2 Kings 5:1-19** and his cure from the disease of leprosy. Naaman was commanded by the prophet Elisha to dip in the river Jordan seven times and he was told that when he did this he would be cleansed of his disease. This is a specific “type” pointing to obedience leading to remission of sins. When Naaman finally obeyed the command of the prophet he was cleansed of the disease which threatened his physical life, just as when we finally obey the New Testament command to be baptized, we are cleansed of the disease of sin that threatens our spiritual lives. By the way, Naaman had to obey the command exactly as it was given to him by Elisha; substitutions of any kind would not work for him (i.e he could not do it in another river although he wanted to, and he had to dip himself seven times, six would not do). There is a lesson in this to us from this aspect of the example, and it is simply that we cannot substitute any part of the commandment of baptism for human convention and have it validated by God... He will not recognize it. He has told us what to do and if we are to be cleansed from sin we will do it just as he has prescribed.

These parallels of types and purposes that foreshadowed baptism in the Christian era were not the only examples like this under the Old Covenant. Next to them we see the ministry of John the Baptist which was prophesied in the Old Testament scriptures as being a ministry that would specifically prepare the way for the Lord Jesus. This ministry too, is an example for us, and it took place under the reign of the Old Covenant even though it is detailed in the New Testament scriptures. Let's look at what the Old Testament says about the ministry of John in **Malachi 3:1**, **Isaiah 40:3-5**. Note that these passages from Isaiah are specifically quoted in all four Gospels and are used to identify John the Baptist and his ministry and the passage from Malachi is used in Mark's Gospel. Now let's look at **Mark 1:1-5**.

John the Baptist was clearly the messenger referred to in the Old Testament scriptures sent to prepare the way for Christ... to prepare the children of Israel to receive their Messiah. And what was he doing in order to prepare the way? Look closely at **Mark 1:4** and (and **Luke 3:3**)... he was "**preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins**". Does this not sound remarkably **Acts 2:38** where Peter states, "**Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...**" It is not at all difficult to see that John was indeed preparing the way for Christ to set the Father's plan of salvation in motion for mankind, especially when we see that the first sermon ever preached in the Christian era delivered the same message! As God's messenger in preparing the way for Christ, John was introducing baptism as a necessary command from God for the remission of sins.

Additionally, just as John was preparing the way for the children of Israel to receive their Messiah, he was also foreshadowing for us the way that the world would receive Christ under the terms of the New Covenant... by repenting and then being immersed in the waters of baptism for the remission of sins. We can receive Christ, and conversely Christ can receive us, in no other way. As a note we also see that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. We see that Jesus clearly did this to be obedient to God as he tells us in **Matthew 3:15**. Obviously Christ wanted to emphasize to us the importance of baptism as an act of obedience. It is a shame that most of the religious world today cannot see these parallels and the fact patterns they clearly point out.

### **Baptism in Apostolic Times...**

Baptism in the time of the apostles, and early in the history of the church, was adhered to as an ordinance that came from God through Christ. The nature and importance of the act of baptism was shown clearly when it was delivered as the first part of the last commandment of Christ, while still on earth, to the apostles in **Matthew 28:19** and **Mark 16:16**, and it was delivered as the first command by Peter, in **Acts 2:38**, to those inquiring about how to receive salvation in the beginning of the Christian era... and it was practiced in its pure form. Baptism was performed for the remission of sins and to receive the gift or sealing of the Holy Spirit. It was administered as a form by immersion only, as seen clearly from the New Testament scriptures, from the writings of the early church fathers and from archeological evidence found in early church gathering places. This is widely acknowledged by scholars of all denominational backgrounds throughout

Christian religious history. **Acts 2:42** sums up the way things were during this period when it states, “**And they continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine...**”

### **The Falling Away...**

This event was something that began even as the apostles were teaching, as evidenced by their addressing of so much rampant error in their epistles, and it continued to occur gradually over time until there was a complete apostasy from the doctrine of the apostles by recognizable religious bodies. It was prophesied by Paul in his letters as we see from **2 Thessalonians 2:3-7**, **1 Timothy 4:1&2**, and **2 Timothy 4:3&4**, and it was prophesied by Peter in **2 Peter 2:1...** And so we go from the pure apostolic teachings of **1 Peter 3:21**, **Acts 22:16**, **Acts 2:38 & 47**, and **John 3:5 & 23...**

To this...“**Baptism** – a ritual practiced in the New Testament church that is still used in various forms by different denominations and branches of the Christian church. Baptism involves the application of water to the body of a person. It is frequently thought of as an act by which the believer enters the fellowship of a local congregation or the universal church. Widely differing interpretations of the act exist among Christian groups. They have different views on the nature of baptism, who should be baptized, and the appropriate method by which baptism should be administered.”

- **Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary; Youngblood, Bruce and Harrison 1995**

So how did we get here? First of all let me clearly state that anything that perverts a commandment of the Lord is the work of Satan. The Falling Away prophesied in scripture gave rise to the perversion of much of the doctrine of Christ and the apostles. One of the most prominent examples of this is what has happened to the ordinance of baptism, its purpose, its form and its very practice. Almost immediately we see destructive doctrines introduced during and shortly after the apostolic era. These began a slide downward that turned into an avalanche of error.

The ordinance of baptism began to see its first perversion in the falling away from the form of it. The word “baptize” comes to us in the English language as a transliteration (not a translation) of the word *baptizo* from the Greek language. It literally means “to dip or to immerse” (Thayer), it has no other meaning in this context. Yet for some reason we see that as early as the second century A.D. and certainly by the third century A.D. that man had begun to think it alright to change the mode in which baptism had been practiced. We know this because in 251 A.D. we see the first recorded digression from the apostolic pattern from immersion to sprinkling. The record details the sprinkling of a man named Novatian who received the sprinkling while lying in his sickbed presumably about to die. Sprinkling as a mode then began to be practiced more and more often until the mode of how we are to be baptized became completely confused over time, culminating with the Catholic Church legalizing it as the form for baptism at the Council of Ravenna in 1311. It was embraced because it became commonplace “spreading from the sickroom to churches” – *Johnson’s Universal Cyclopedia Vol. 1 page 488*.

Incidentally, sprinkling as a mode began and was seen as being effective, because a doctrine had arisen that taught there were magical effects in the water, of which there are not. This was another error. Additionally, there are no similarities in the original Greek

language between the word for sprinkle and the word for immersion. Sprinkling is not baptism.

The confusion over the form was further contributed to by the transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo* referred to earlier. If it had simply been translated into English for what it is, immersion, then much of the controversy today over the mode of baptism would be pointless. Immersion is immersion and sprinkling is sprinkling, the two are not the same and never will be. This confusion over translation versus transliteration seems to have first been perpetrated by the translation of the Bishop's Bible by the Church of England early in their history (1500's) and was caused by the reaction to a rupture that occurred between the English clergy in the Church of England and the Catholic Church.

The idea of who was a candidate for baptism took a slide downhill with introduction of infant baptism which is a total departure from apostolic teaching. This new practice was born as a response to two influences: the rise of a new doctrine which began in the third century; the doctrine of original sin, and to a belief partly held by some around the same time in the parallels between the Christian religion and the participation of children at an early age in certain rituals of Greek cults. Both of these influences led to a complete perversion of the purpose of baptism and a great departure from the teaching of the apostles.

The new doctrine of original sin, although it was challenged at first (and the baptism of infants was still stiffly opposed in many quarters), became more and more accepted when it first began to be championed by Augustine in the fourth century A.D. Then it became commonly accepted based on the power of Augustine's position and influence within the early church.

Infant baptism today is chiefly practiced by sprinkling and in many religious groups its practice is still based upon adherence to the doctrine of original sin that began with Augustine in the fourth century and was then picked up by John Calvin in 1541 and became known as the Calvinistic doctrine of total hereditary depravity.

The meaning and purpose of baptism was to experience one more hammer blow from the hands of Swiss man named Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531). He is the perpetrator of one of the greatest perversions ever foisted upon the Christian religion... and his perversion is alive and well today in the doctrine that teaches that baptism is done only to demonstrate faith and loyalty and a belonging to the Lord... that it is not for the remission of sins. He first stated this idea in 1523, and with his declaration of it, he denied 15 centuries of valid thought on at least what was the purpose and meaning of the ordinance of baptism... to wash away one's sins.

The influence of his ideas and the popularizing of this doctrine is seen today especially in the baggage carried about by many of the denominational churches that started during the Reformation, and it had its genesis in Switzerland in 1523. Hence we now have people who want to retranslate **Acts 2:38** to read that you need to be baptized because your sins are already forgiven. The perversion is now completed with this departure.

## **The Movement to Restore...**

The movement to restore the doctrine of New Testament baptism was a necessary by-product of the idea of restoring the church of Jesus Christ to its pure apostolic form as outlined in the New Testament. Most of the ideas behind this modern restoration effort were born and first taught here in America, and with these ideas came the call to be just Christians, to speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where it is silent, to add nothing to the scriptures and to take nothing away from the scriptures... all ideas that hark back to the simple expression of **Acts 2:42**... **“And they continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine...”**

Men like Barton W. Stone, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell became champions for the restoration of the New Testament doctrines regarding the church including the teachings on baptism. They reaffirmed for all to hear that baptism is for the remission or washing away of one’s sins, that when you are baptized you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, that baptism is administered only to adult subjects who have been taught by the word of God and is strictly done by immersion, and that you are added to the church by God when you obey the ordinance.

Stone and the Campbells began their work in the early 1800’s and it was through much study of the scriptures and prayer that they found the right and righteous course. It is interesting that they all arrived at the same conclusions especially on baptism separately... they did not know each other until after they had begun the teaching of restoration. And so, with these men and the congregations of believers they helped to establish through to today, we finally come full circle in the history regarding baptism... we once again know the beauty of baptism and its intended purpose in God’s plan of salvation.