

## WATER BAPTISM COMMANDED BY JESUS FOR CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES

*By Anthony Buzzard*

There are friends whose zeal for the Bible is undoubted, but who have been taught that baptism in water is a pointless ritual not applicable to Christians.

The argument has been put this way:

"There are two major baptisms in New Testament:

- 1) water baptism begun by John the Baptist,
- 2) baptism in the spirit, the baptism which Jesus Christ baptizes with, and which makes someone a Christian."

Take a careful look at the above statement. It is really not a fair account of what the Bible teaches. There is a major missing factor. The facts are that Jesus also baptized in water.

There are therefore three baptisms, not two:

- 1) the water baptism of John the Baptist,
- 2) the water baptism authorized by Jesus,
- 3) baptism in the Spirit.

Everyone is familiar with the baptism of John. It has clearly been superseded by Christian baptism. Christian baptism is BOTH by water AND by spirit.

In [John 4:1-2](#) we learn that *"Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself was not baptizing, but his disciples were)." John 3:22* says that *"Jesus and his disciples came into the land of Judea and there Jesus was spending time with them and baptizing."* There is no doubt, therefore, that Jesus baptized in water (although the actual act of immersion was performed by his agents, the disciples). This initiation ceremony was baptism performed by Jesus - Christian baptism in water.

The great commission mandates that disciples until the end of the age go into all nations and teach whatever Jesus taught. Part of that commanded discipling process is to *"baptize them into the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit"* ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)). That is a clear command from the lips of Jesus, and it features amongst the marching orders of the Church.

The Apostles clearly understood it that way.

Peter's appeal to his first century audience has not become obsolete : *"Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"* ([Acts 2:38](#)).

The typical initiation into the Church is by repentance, believing the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Name of Jesus Christ and baptism in water. [Acts 8:12](#) provides an early creed: *"When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the Gospel about the Kingdom and the Name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women."*

As if to leave no possible loopholes, Luke reports that even after the reception of the Holy Spirit, the Gentiles were to be baptized in water. Peter was only following his Lord's

command when he called for water and *"ordered them to be baptized who had received the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 10:47-48).

When Paul discovered converts who had received John's water baptism only, he immediately administered Christian water baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5).

The New Testament Church certainly did not teach that spirit baptism replaced Christian water baptism. The two go together as the standard way in which a person is joined to the body of Christ. Late in his career, Peter can still talk of *"baptism which saves" us, as "an appeal to God for a good conscience"* (1 Peter 3:21).

Of course, no one is suggesting that there is anything "magical" in the water. What counts is the child like submission to the ordinance prescribed by Jesus. It is a simple matter of obedience.

Baptism without a persistent continuation in the Christian life cannot save a person, any more than a onetime decision which is not followed by commitment. Salvation is by grace and faith, which means also (in Paul's words ) *"obedience from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed"* (Romans 6:17).

That teaching included baptism.

This way of inviting converts to become Christians is a part of what salvation by faith meant to the Apostles. They taught the *"obedience of faith"* everywhere (Romans 1:5 & Romans 16:26).

God has given us a proper procedure for admission to his Church. Baptism in water is a public renouncing of sin and a determination to serve God and the Messiah. Labels like "carnal ordinance" or "legalism" misrepresent the apostolic teaching about Christian water baptism.

Jesus himself was baptized in water (Luke 3:21). He made and baptized converts (John 4:1), and he ordered his followers to make and baptize converts (Matthew 28:19-20).

There is ample evidence in Acts and the Epistles that the Apostles carried out their Lord's instructions. On what authority should we challenge these and say that baptism is unnecessary.

There is no need for division or difference over this very simple matter, which has not been a problematic issue for millions of Bible readers over many centuries.

Evangelicals recognize that Peter's appeal for repentance and baptism is strikingly different from the modern evangelistic formula. Writing on "Conversion in the Bible", R.T. France observes that:

*"Our tendency to see baptism as a symbolic this optional extra, or to be embarrassed by the inclusion of a physical act as part of the spiritual process of conversion, contrasts with the strongly "realist" language of the New Testament about the saving significance of baptism (e.g. John 3:5, Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 3:20-21). While there are no New Testament grounds for believing that baptism by itself makes a person a Christian, the idea of an unbaptized Christian is equally foreign to its thought. 'Without it [baptism] a believer did not enter the primitive community of faith.'* (S.S. Smalley). Evangelical Quarterly, 65:4, 1993, p.306".

We appeal, therefore, to dispensationalists who have been caught in the falsely spiritual view that the physical act of baptism is not part of Christian discipleship. It was the gnostics who created a mistaken division between what is physical and what is spiritual.

The Apostles, in mandating water baptism, were obedient, as we should be, to the command of Christ. And recognizing the Lordship of Jesus is the heart of what it means to be a believer. There is no genuine confession of Jesus as Lord without obedience ([Romans 10:9](#)).

---

Anthony Buzzard, M.A. (Oxon) MA.Th., is Professor of Bible at Atlanta Bible College, Georgia, U.S.A

---