

# Baptism in the New Testament

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Most Christians today view baptism as an essential part of their faith tradition and the initial step toward following Jesus Christ and receiving a remission of their sins. Furthermore, they often view baptism as a sacred act, a sacrament, a rite, or an ordinance that is necessary to obtain salvation. For Latter-day Saints, baptism plays a critical role in initiating the process of justification and sanctification, “elements of a single divine process that qualifies us to live in the presence of God the Father and Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> While many suppose that baptism had its origins in the baptism performed by John the Baptist, Latter-day Saints believe that baptism “was not a new rite introduced by John the Baptist and adopted by Christ and his followers.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, we hold the unique perspective that baptism has been a vital part of God’s salvific plan for his children from the very beginning.

Through modern revelation, Latter-day Saints understand that the ordinance of baptism was introduced first to Adam sometime after the Fall. After being expelled from the Garden of Eden and God’s presence, Adam heard the voice of the Lord instructing and commanding him, saying: “If thou wilt turn unto me, and hearken unto my voice, and believe, and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized, even in water, in the name of mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth, which is Jesus Christ, the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men, ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, asking all things in his name, and whatsoever ye shall ask, it shall be given you” (Moses 6:52). With this initial commandment and instruction to Adam, the Lord explained the rich, profound, and beautiful symbolism connected to this redeeming rite:

That by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory; for by the water ye keep the commandment; by the Spirit ye are justified, and by the blood ye are sanctified. . . .

And now, behold, I say unto you: This is the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time. . . .

And it came to pass, when the Lord had spoken with Adam, our father, that Adam cried unto the Lord, and he was caught away by the Spirit of the Lord, and was carried down into the water, and was laid under the water, and was brought forth out of the water. And thus he was baptized, and the Spirit of God descended upon him, and thus he was born of the Spirit, and became quickened in the inner man. And he heard a voice out of heaven, saying: Thou art baptized with fire, and with the Holy Ghost. This is the record of the Father, and the Son, from henceforth and forever; and thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity. Behold, thou art one in me, a son of God; and thus may all become my sons. Amen. (Moses 6:59–60, 62, 64–68)

The Lord also made it clear that as long as children were born into a fallen and sinful world their parents were commanded to “teach these things freely” unto their children (Moses 6:58).

Although there are no direct references in the Old Testament indicating that the posterity of Adam kept this commandment, Joseph Smith and the scriptures of the Restoration make it clear that the ordinance of baptism was performed throughout antiquity. Joseph Smith taught:

[T]he ancients who were actually the fathers of the church in the different ages, when the church flourished on the earth, . . . were initiated into the kingdom by baptism, for it is self evident in the scripture—God changes not. . . . [T]herefore, as Noah was a *preacher* of righteousness he must have been *baptised*. . . . In the former ages of the world, before the Saviour came in the flesh, “the saints” were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ to come . . . that they might be buried in baptism like him, and be raised in glory like him, that as there was but *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, and *one* God and father of us all, even so there was but *one* door to the mansions of bliss.<sup>3</sup>

The pre-Christian-era portion of the Book of Mormon—more than three-quarters of the book—contains many references to baptism and, according to Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “some of the best information we have relative to this eternal law.”<sup>4</sup> The Book of

Mormon makes it clear that the people were both living the fullness of the law of Moses and performing baptism by immersion.

If one steps away from the lens of the Restoration and looks strictly at the religious cultures surrounding the emergence of Christianity, it is easy to see that the use of water played an important role in the purification and initiation rites of those religious cultures. In fact, such rites and even immersion were common practices in the religious culture of the Greeks and Romans, especially among the various mystery religions.<sup>5</sup> Often these washings were a preliminary preparation for initiation into the mystery religions, but occasionally ideas of rebirth or forgiveness were associated with these washings.<sup>6</sup>

It is also well known that the Jews performed a variety of purification and initiation rites associated with water and immersion. These Jewish washings, especially Jewish proselyte baptisms, have been considered by many as the antecedents to the mode of John's baptism, and all of them—Greco-Roman, Jewish, and John's immersion rites—have been considered by one scholar or another to be the antecedents for Christian baptism.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned above, Latter-day Saints understand and believe the origin of Christian baptism stems from Adam; however, similarities one may find in other immersion rites become superficial when the basic but significant differences between those rites and that of Christian baptism are recognized. For the purposes of this chapter, we will explore baptism as it is found in the New Testament only.

## John the Baptist

In the New Testament, the first baptismal experience one will come across is that of John, who was given the appropriate title “‘Baptist’ (*Baptistēs*) or ‘the Baptizer’ (*o Baptizōn*, ‘the one immersing’).”<sup>8</sup> John was the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, who were both of the priestly lineage of Aaron and through whom John inherited the right to officiate in the Aaronic priesthood.<sup>9</sup> According to Doctrine and Covenants 84:28, John was ordained to this priesthood by an angel when he was only eight days old. His mission was foretold by Isaiah, Lehi, Malachi, and Gabriel.<sup>10</sup> John (the Baptist) seems to have been aware of these prophecies and sought security, confidence, and strength in them (John 1:23). Jesus—who was himself the ultimate beneficiary of John's prophetic work—had high compliments for his older cousin. He told a multitude of Jews that John was “a burning and a shining light” (5:35), and at another time Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11).

According to the Prophet Joseph Smith, John the Baptist was not great on account of the miracles he performed, because he performed no miracles. Rather, John the Baptist was the greatest born among women for three reasons: first, he was trusted with the divine mission of preparing the way before the face of the Lord; second, he was trusted and required to baptize Christ and to be a witness of the Holy Ghost descending upon him; and third, “John at that time was the only legal administrator holding the keys of power. . . . The keys, the kingdom, the power, the glory had departed from the Jews; and John, the son of Zachariah,

by the holy anointing and decree of heaven, held the keys of power at the time.”<sup>11</sup> With these great responsibilities, John the Baptist stood in a very peculiar position at a very unique time. He was the “last legal administrator of the old dispensation, the first of the new; he was the last of the old prophets, the first of the new,” Elder McConkie wrote. “With him ended the old law, and with him began the new era of promise. He is the one man who stood, literally, at the crossroads of history; with him the past died and the future was born.”<sup>12</sup>

The Lord tells us that John was to “*overthrow the kingdom of the Jews*, and to make straight the way of the Lord before the face of his people, to prepare them for the coming of the Lord, in whose hand is given all power” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:28; emphasis added). For years the wicked, corrupt, and greedy leadership of the Jews had focused more on growing their wealth—especially through corrupting the temple economy—and expanding their power than they had on leading Israel in truth and righteousness according to God’s law. Thus, in this state of apostasy, the Jews had become a kingdom unto themselves. To overthrow the kingdom of the Jews and reestablish the kingdom of God, a major spiritual revolution would need to happen.<sup>13</sup> John the Baptist understood the role he was to play, and he performed it to perfection. Naturally, such a prophetic mission would create unwanted disruption, especially among the established ruling class of the Jews. But John did not back down, hesitate, or share his message quietly. He went about as foretold by the prophet Isaiah and confirmed by all the Gospels, “crying” in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3; compare Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23).

John’s command to repent and prepare for the coming Messiah, and his demand that Israel produce evidence to show their sincerity, generated no small stir. As Matthew records, “then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5–6). John’s cry of repentance did not just reach the downtrodden masses of Judea, it had also reached the powerful and wealthy Jewish leadership, and apparently it raised questions within their circles as to whether or not he was the Messiah. The Gospel of John records that while John was baptizing in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, the Pharisees “sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who art thou?”—and after discovering that he was not the Messiah, they asked him, “Why baptizest thou then?” (John 1:19, 25). John answered this question using Isaiah’s prophecy, saying that he was “making straight the way of the Lord” (1:23).

The fact that John was not in Jerusalem or inviting the people to the temple may shed some light on the religious state that Israel and its leaders were in. Israel had looked beyond the symbolism the law of Moses was intended to create. According to John, many in Jewish leadership were abusive and corrupt: a “generation of vipers” who were going to be “hewn down” (Matthew 3:7, 10). John’s baptism was to make crooked Israel straight again and to prepare them to receive their God.

First, John’s baptism offered the Israelites an opportunity to truly repent and receive forgiveness of their sins. John’s baptism “was doubtless preceded by an exhortation by John, and the people were baptized ‘confessing their sins’” (Mark 1:5; Matthew 3:6).<sup>14</sup> Israel as a people had broken God’s law and had gone astray; thus, because of their disobedience, they

were under the condemnation of law. However, through John's baptism Israel could become justified, or in other words pardoned from the punishment of the broken law. Accepting John's baptism meant Israel could stand blameless or without sin so that when the Lord came with his baptism of fire they could be sanctified, or in other words made holy and clean as he is holy and clean.<sup>15</sup> Everett Ferguson, an authority on baptism in the early church, states that the baptism of John "was a conversion baptism but not a variation of proselyte baptism; its premise was repentance, and its purpose was the forgiveness of sins; it was not the basis of a new Israel or to join a new community (the goal was a renewal of Israel)."<sup>16</sup>

Second, it is possible that John may have been trying to restore the law of Moses in its purity and entirety by reintroducing the baptismal ordinance, which had been lost over time through various stages of apostasy. It is clear from Jesus's interaction with Nicodemus, who was a ruler among the Jews, that the Jewish people and their leadership no longer knew about or understood baptism. The idea of baptism as a rebirth was perplexing to Nicodemus. The Book of Mormon makes it clear that baptism fits perfectly within the framework of the law of Moses; the ordinance of baptism—much like animal sacrifice within the law of Moses—acted as a symbolic reference to Christ's atonement. Just as Christ died, was buried in the tomb, and resurrected the third day, the proselyte symbolically dies in Christ, giving up the old life of sin, and is buried with Christ in the water; and as Christ came forth from the tomb, so the proselyte comes forth out of the water a new creature in Christ (Romans 6:1–6). The prophetic authors of the Book of Mormon mention forty-three times that they lived the law of Moses, and they mention baptism ninety times. A restoration of the full law of Moses would therefore prepare Israel for the Lord's coming among them and for the reception of the fullness of his gospel.

Many scholars have sought to link John's baptism to earlier and contemporary Jewish purification and cleansing washings, proselyte baptism, and the baths of the Essenes and others.<sup>17</sup> The similarities have led some scholars to view such washings as antecedents of John's baptism. Both Jewish washings and John's baptism contain a theme of purification or cleansing. Many Jewish washings—like John's—were performed by immersion. Jewish proselyte baptism was an initiation rite for Gentiles who were converting to Judaism, and John's baptism was also a conversion or reconversion for Israel's people.

However, there are distinct differences that disconnect John's baptism from these Jewish washings as possible antecedents. John's baptism was a onetime event. Most of the Jewish washings were a ceremonial purification rite that would be performed when needed throughout one's lifetime. John's baptism was focused on repentance and the forgiveness of sins to prepare Israel for the coming of their Lord. Thus, John's baptism was an eschatological purification rite rather than a ceremonial one.<sup>18</sup> Jewish proselyte baptism was an initiation rite for Gentiles seeking to join the Israelite community.<sup>19</sup> John held priesthood keys and personally administered his baptism, whereas Jewish proselyte baptism and other purification baths or washings were a self-immersion (often with two or three witnesses).<sup>20</sup> As Ferguson notes, "This practice provides the most plausible explanation for the descrip-

tion of John as ‘the Baptist’: He was doing something different, or else the designation would not have distinguished him.”<sup>21</sup>

## The Baptism of Jesus Christ

Immediately after introducing John and his baptism, the New Testament Gospels record unique but similar accounts of Christianity’s most important baptism—the baptism of Jesus Christ. This important event marks a major transition between the baptism and ministry of John and the baptism and ministry of Jesus Christ—a transition that John was cognizant would happen if he fulfilled his role as the forerunner of Christ. When John’s disgruntled disciples reported the increase of Jesus’s popularity and followers, John taught them, “He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. *He must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3:29–30; emphasis added).

Matthew’s account of Jesus’s baptism is the longest of all four Gospel accounts, comprising all of five verses. It emphasizes John’s humble hesitancy to fulfill his sacred mission of baptizing the Son of God: “I have need to be baptized of thee,” Matthew records John as saying, “and comest thou to me?” (Matthew 3:14).<sup>22</sup> Jesus responds, “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” (3:15), and this might be meant to answer more than just John’s anxieties. Perhaps Matthew, with his clear understanding of the necessity of baptism, included this interchange between the Baptist and the Christ to answer the questions that some would have concerning a sinless Messiah receiving “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4). It appears the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi felt the need to address the same issue in his record and did so in detail:

And now, I would ask of you, my beloved brethren, wherein the Lamb of God did fulfil all righteousness in being baptized by water? Know ye not that he was holy? But notwithstanding he being holy, he showeth unto the children of men that, according to the flesh he humbleth himself before the Father, and witnesseth unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments. Wherefore, after he was baptized with water the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove. And again, it showeth unto the children of men the straitness of the path, and the narrowness of the gate, by which they should enter, he having set the example before them. And he said unto the children of men: Follow thou me. (2 Nephi 31:6–10)

Nephi’s expounding of the phrase “fulfill all righteousness”—and one could argue Matthew used the phrase in the same manner—explains that Jesus was not receiving John’s baptism for a remission of sins, for he was sinless. Rather, Jesus was baptized to (1) show mankind that although he was the all-powerful Jehovah in the flesh, he was humble before his Father; (2) witness to or covenant with his Father that he would be obedient; (3) show mankind the strictness, exactness, and discipline required to enter the kingdom of God; and (4) show, as Christ himself taught, that baptism is necessary for salvation (John 3:5).

“To fulfill all righteousness,” writes Elder McConkie, “is to perform every ordinance, keep every commandment, and do every act necessary to the attainment of eternal life.”<sup>23</sup> If Jesus’s commanding invitation was to follow him, we should know what he did and how he did it.

Luke’s account of Jesus’s baptism is the shortest among the Synoptic Gospels, only two verses in all. This is a little surprising following Luke’s attention to detail leading up to this important event. Although it is short, Luke does preserve important details not found in the other Gospels. For instance, only Luke mentions that the heavens being opened and the Spirit descending were a result of Jesus praying (3:21). Luke’s description of the Holy Ghost’s appearance at Jesus’s baptism is also unique. Matthew, Mark, and John each mention the Spirit descending upon Jesus “like a dove” (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; John 1:32), but Luke records that “the Holy Ghost descended in a *bodily shape* like a dove” (3:22; emphasis added) and retains the eternal truth concerning the Godhead as found in Doctrine and Covenants 130:22. Speaking of the Spirit’s descent at Christ’s baptism, Joseph Smith taught:

The sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost, and the devil cannot come in the sign of a dove. The Holy Ghost is a personage, and is in the form of a personage. It does not confine itself to the *form* of the dove, but in *sign* of the dove. The Holy Ghost cannot be transformed into a dove; but the sign of a dove was given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or token of truth and innocence.<sup>24</sup>

The Gospel of John suggests the same idea for the role the Holy Ghost played at the baptism of Jesus. John (the Beloved) records the Baptist as saying: “He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:33).

## Baptism in the Gospels

On the subject of baptism, the Synoptic Gospels are generally quite sparse, with just a few subtle references. Perhaps the most significant comes at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. After the Resurrection and forty-day ministry, and just before his ascension into heaven, the Lord gave his apostles a charge: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19). This commission was taken seriously by the apostles, and accounts of their many baptisms can be read in the Acts of the Apostles and in the epistles of Paul. However, those accounts were not the first experience Jesus’s disciples had with baptism.

In the Fourth Gospel, John records a fascinating insight concerning Jesus, his disciples, and baptism. In John 3 we see that the ministries of the Baptist and Jesus overlap. Jesus, along with his disciples, went into the land of Judea for precisely the same reason John the Baptist was there, namely to baptize, “because there was much water there” (3:23). It is clear that John was fulfilling his prophetic mission to prepare the way before the Lord; as one

of the Baptist's disciples reported, "Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him" (3:26). John 4:1 mentions that news had made it to the Pharisees that Jesus had "made and baptized more disciples than John," and apparently this made them uneasy. As the Joseph Smith Translation for verses 2–4 clarifies: "They sought more diligently some means that they might put him to death; for many received John as a prophet, but they believed not on Jesus. Now the Lord knew this, though he himself baptized not so many as his disciples; for he suffered them for an example, preferring one another" (JST John 4:2–4). These verses make it clear that Jesus was indeed performing the ordinance of baptism himself but primarily gave that responsibility to his disciples so they could be an example.<sup>25</sup>

Although Jesus, his disciples, and early Christian leaders also baptized in water unto repentance, the baptism they were performing had minor but significant differences in comparison to the baptism of John. For one, those who received Christian baptism would have taken upon themselves Christ's name. In addition to this a promise was added "that in due course [Christ's] converts would be baptized by the Spirit."<sup>26</sup> It is most likely that because of these small but vital differences, Jesus and his disciples were not only baptizing new followers but rebaptizing John's disciples that were listening to and obeying the Baptist's message and invitation to follow the Lamb of God, including Andrew and John (John 3:36–37). John the Baptist himself taught his disciples that "I indeed have baptized you with water; but he shall not only baptize you *with water*, but with fire, and the Holy Ghost" (JST Mark 1:8; emphasis added). Acts 19:1–7 provides an example of a group of John the Baptist's disciples receiving Christian baptism some two decades after the Resurrection:

And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, he said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve.

It seems evident from these verses that those who had been baptized and were disciples of John were rebaptized in the name of Christ.

The Gospel of John contains another important story dealing with baptism: John 3:3–5. These verses are the foundational authority for Christian baptism for one main reason—they record the Lord himself teaching about the purpose and necessity of baptism. In these verses, the Lord teaches that through baptism one is born anew, reborn from above or spiritually reborn, through the dual cleansing and sanctifying powers of baptism in the water and from the Spirit (John 3:3, 5).<sup>27</sup> Thus, Jesus brings together the two elements of baptism that



were separate in John's baptism.<sup>28</sup> Jesus boldly emphasized to the Pharisaic teacher and ruler Nicodemus that baptism is prerequisite to seeing and gaining entrance into the kingdom of God. The teachings of Christianity's central figure in these verses make it essential for those who claim to be Christ-centered in their faith, and for all who are seeking after him, to be born anew through the waters of baptism and the reception of the Holy Ghost.

## Baptism in the Acts of the Apostles

Acts preserves much regarding the role baptism played in the early church and what Christian baptism—baptism of water and the Spirit—looked like in the earliest days of the primitive church. In this section we will look at two insightful pericopes dealing with baptism: the day of Pentecost and Philip's ministry in Samaria.

### *The day of Pentecost*

Fifty days after Passover was the Jewish celebration of Pentecost, also known as “the feast of harvest” (Exodus 23:16), “the feast of weeks” (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10), or “the day of the firstfruits” (Numbers 28:26). The day of Pentecost marks the day in which the Lord's promised endowment of the Holy Ghost was fulfilled. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “During his mortal ministry our Lord gave his disciples the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the right to the constant companionship of that member of the Godhead based on faithfulness (John 20:22). But as long as Jesus was with them, the actual enjoyment of the gift was withheld (John 7:39; 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:7–15; Acts 1:8). Fulfilment of the promise came on the day of Pentecost.”<sup>29</sup>

It is important to understand that there were different groups of people interacting in various ways with the spiritual outpouring on that day. Gathered together were the disciples of the Lord experiencing the gifts of the Spirit (Acts 2:4). Then there were those witnessing this miraculous event who felt the influence of the Spirit and stood in amazement as they heard God's word in their own language (2:7–8). There were also those who mocked (2:13). It was to these last two groups that Peter bore a powerful witness of Christ, causing those gathered to be “pricked in their heart” and to ask what they needed to do (2:37). Peter's response to their question provides insight into the process of conversion in the early church and gives us some understanding as to what baptism looked like in first-century Christianity: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . . Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (2:38, 41). From these verses, it appears that baptism was a necessary part of following Jesus Christ in the post-Resurrection church. According to Peter's invitation, it appears that a proselyte must show or manifest faith in Jesus Christ and his teachings and repentance in order to be baptized and gain entrance into Christ's church. Like the baptism of John, first-century baptism brought a remission of sins but was

performed in the name of Christ and was followed by the proselyte receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands (8:17).

### *Philip's ministry in Samaria*

Acts 8:5–19 contains the account of Philip—one of the “seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (6:3)—ministering in Samaria and provides additional insight into first-century baptism. The account states that Philip “preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did” (8:5–6). Their belief increased to the point that “they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (8:12). The main insight from this story is gained from the following verses:

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (for as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. (8:14–17)

There are many things we can learn from this account. First, there were some in the first century who, like Philip, held the priesthood authority to baptize with water and had powerful faith to work many miracles but did not have the power or authority to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost. This power seems to have rested with the apostles during at least part of the first century. Second, the gift of the Holy Ghost was bestowed by the laying on of hands, something Latter-day Saints would find familiar to their baptismal experience. Third, this account emphasizes the important two-part nature of baptism that Christ taught to Nicodemus. The Samaritan Saints believed and were baptized with water, but their baptism was complete only when Peter and John came and bestowed the gift of the Holy Ghost.

## Baptism in the Pauline Epistles

The letters of the apostle Paul, although they are very time- and context-specific, are important early Christian texts because they provide a window through which we can observe the earliest forms of Christianity after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “The apostle Paul is a central figure for the study of Christian baptism,” writes Ferguson. “His own experience and the evidence of his letters show baptism to have been practiced from the earliest days of the church.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Galatians 3:26–27*

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul expounded on the purposes for the law of Moses and the role it played in pointing Israel to Christ. Paul refuted the claims made by the Judaizers—

Christians who believed and taught that in order to become Abraham's seed and gain salvation, one needed to conform to the law of Moses by explaining that Abraham's seed were individuals of faith.<sup>31</sup> It was faith in Christ that connected one to the promises of Abraham, not the law. God's law acts as a guide or schoolmaster to help us learn of Christ and become more like him. However, because of our inability to keep the law perfectly, it is the law that condemns us. The law itself has no power to save; Christ alone saves. Christ, through his atonement, allows us to be justified by obedience to the law. We are sanctified and saved through faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is expressed through the act of baptism. As Paul stated, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26–27).

The phrase "baptized into Christ" more accurately means baptized in the name of Christ. Beasley-Murray explains: "The *Eis Xriston* ('into Christ') is to be understood as an abbreviation of the common *Eis to onoma tou Xristou* ('in the name of Christ') and therefore has the meaning of baptism with reference to Christ, for dedication to and appropriation by Christ."<sup>32</sup> Thus, through baptism one receives or takes upon himself or herself a new name and becomes part of a new family—the family of Christ. King Benjamin taught: "I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives. And it shall come to pass that whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ" (Mosiah 5:8–9). Elder McConkie explained this process in this manner:

Those accountable mortals who then believe and obey the gospel are born again; they are born of the Spirit; they become alive to the things of righteousness or of the Spirit. They become members of another family, have new brothers and sisters, and a new Father. They are the sons and daughters of Jesus Christ. They take upon them his name in the waters of baptism and certify anew each time they partake of the sacrament that they have so done; or, more accurately, in the waters of baptism power is given them to become the sons of Christ, which eventuates when they are in fact born of the Spirit and become new creatures of the Holy Ghost.<sup>33</sup>

The second half of Paul's statement is striking, powerful, and beautiful, but it naturally produces feelings of humility and inadequacy when one begins to understand its implications in daily life. "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have *put on Christ*" (Galatians 3:27; emphasis added). In other words, by taking upon oneself Christ's name through baptism, one has chosen to take upon himself or herself the appearance of Christ that comes through the endowment of the Spirit. For Latter-day Saints, this comes through living a Christlike life. As the Book of Mormon prophet Alma stated while questioning the people of the church in Zarahemla: "And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye *received his image in your countenances?*" (Alma 5:14; emphasis added). Ferguson writes, "Baptism places one into Christ, so that one is now clothed with Christ, having put him on as one puts on clothing. This has

the effect of bringing to one the benefits that are Christ's, making one what Christ is—true descendant of Abraham, heir of the promises, son God, recipient of the Spirit.”<sup>34</sup>

### *1 Corinthians 15:29*

According to 1 Corinthians 15, there were some among the saints in Corinth that were either doubting, or even possibly teaching against, the reality of the Resurrection (both Christ's and the coming one of all humanity). To combat such views, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul made a progressive, rational argument for the reality of Christ's, and thus all mankind's, bodily resurrection:

But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (15:13–19)

It is in this context—Paul's argument for the reality of the Resurrection—that he says, “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?” (15:29). In other words, Paul is arguing, “There is no point for saints to perform baptisms for those who have died if those who have died won't live again; and if the dead won't live again, then Christianity is a lie.” Paul's purpose was not to teach about baptism, or even baptism for the dead, or to support the doctrines of the latter-day church (though he is citing vicarious baptism); rather, Paul was defending the reality and validity of bodily resurrection.<sup>35</sup> Why perform vicarious baptisms, as the Corinthians were doing, if there will be no resurrection of the dead?

### *Romans 6:1–11*

One of Paul's most well-known explanations of baptism is in his epistle to the Romans. Paul powerfully and beautifully connects the purpose that baptism serves in the conversion process and its relationship to Christ and his atonement. After explaining justification through the grace of Christ, Paul asks a question that transitions the topic to baptism: “Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (6:1–2). Then he explains, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (6:3–4). Paul's use of the phrase “know ye not” indicates that this portion of his message was—or should be—known among the early Christians, namely that those baptized in the name of Christ were baptized into his death.<sup>36</sup>

It is also interesting to note that Paul once again uses the same recognized abbreviated phrase “baptized into Jesus Christ” in this passage as he used in his epistle to the Galatians.

For Paul, baptism is more than just a necessary rite to follow Christ; rather, through baptism one participates with Christ in his atonement. Through baptism, one is buried with Christ into death. “Knowing this,” Paul writes, “that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (6:6). Paul also taught that baptism was in “the likeness of [Christ’s] resurrection” (6:5); one is raised up from the watery grave to “walk in newness of life” (6:4). Baptism, for Paul, was not simply an entrance rite into the kingdom of God but an entrance into a new life in Christ. “Therefore,” Paul wrote to the Corinthian saints, “if any man be in Christ, he is a *new creature*: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17; emphasis added). This is also supported in his previous teachings on baptism found in Galatians.

There are other references to baptism in the epistles of Paul. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul makes a comparison between the law of circumcision and baptism and the role they both play in putting off the natural man and becoming a new being and forsaking sin (2:11–13). In his letter to Titus, Paul teaches that Christ through his mercy saves us “by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (3:5), which again presents baptism as a rite that restores one to purity and establishes or releases the divinity planted within each of us. These references reveal that, for Paul, baptism was vital to one’s progression of faith and relationship to Christ and ultimately to one’s eternal potential. Also, the many symbolic connections found within the Christian baptismal rite had very real applications to life and eternity and very real blessings to be received by the recipient.

## Conclusion

After the Pauline Epistles, there are only a few scattered references to baptism in the remaining New Testament books.<sup>37</sup> From this cursory study, a few things seem clear: (1) baptism, as taught by Christ and later his disciples, was necessary for salvation; (2) Christian baptism must include two parts in order to be complete: the baptism of water and the baptism of the Spirit; (3) Christians manifested their faith in Jesus Christ by being baptized; (4) through baptism, one received a remission of sins; (5) through baptism, one took the name of Christ as well as the responsibility to be a new person, a Christlike person; (6) baptism was necessary to gain entrance into the church of Christ and be numbered among the disciples; and (7) baptism in the first century was more than just an entrance rite; in fact, it was deeply symbolic and connected the participant to Christ and the blessings associated with him—namely, becoming the seed of Abraham and inheriting the blessings and covenant promises of Abraham.



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## Further Reading

- Beasley-Murray, G. R. *Baptism in the New Testament*, 11–31. New York: St. Martin's, 1963.
- Christofferson, D. Todd. "Justification and Sanctification." *Ensign*, June 2001.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Gavin, F. *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments*, 26–58. New York: KTAV, 1969.
- McConkie, Bruce R. *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*. 3 vols. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73.

## Notes

1. D. Todd Christofferson, "Justification and Sanctification," *Ensign*, June 2001, 18.
2. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 52, s.v. "Baptism."
3. *Times and Seasons*, September 1, 1842, 903–5, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-september-1842/9>. See also Doctrine and Covenants 20:23–28, which affirms that the righteous posterity of Adam did, in fact, keep this commandment.
4. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 72.
5. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 25–37.
6. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 29.
7. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), 11–31; Arthur Darby Nock, "Early Gentile Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background," in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1928), 51–156; reprinted in Zeph Stewart, ed., *Arthur Darby Nock: Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 49–133; and F. Gavin, *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments* (repr., New York: KTAV, 1969), 26–58. Gavin makes strong claims that Christianity is a morphed form of Judaism, especially Christian baptism. He argues that it is the same as Jewish proselyte baptism.
8. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 83.
9. Discourse, 22 January 1843, as reported by Wilford Woodruff, p. [6], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-22-january-1843-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/3>.
10. Isaiah 40:3; 1 Nephi 10:7–10; Malachi 3:1 (according to the Lord, in Matthew 11:10, John the Baptist fulfilled Malachi's prophecy); and Luke 1:13–22.
11. Joseph Smith, Discourse, 29 January 1843, as reported by Willard Richards–B, p. [2], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-29-january-1843-as-reported-by-willard-richards-b/1>.
12. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73), 1:113.
13. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 296.
14. C. H. H. Scobie, *John the Baptist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 90–91.
15. For a detailed explanation of justification and sanctification and their relationship to one another, see Christofferson, "Justification and Sanctification."
16. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 89.
17. Gavin, *Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments*; Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 93–102; and Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 15–48. Taylor makes a strong argument that John and his baptism should not be linked to the Essenes.

18. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 88.
19. Some have pointed out that the report in Luke 3:14 that soldiers had responded to John's message might indicate that John baptized Gentiles, but Jewish soldiers who enforced the work of the tax collectors cannot be ruled out.
20. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 81.
21. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 88.
22. This emphasis found in the Gospel accounts of John's declaration that the one coming after him was greater than he and provided a superior baptism may be countering the possible embarrassment felt by later Christians in that Jesus, superior to John, was baptized by the lesser Jewish prophet. The fact that each Gospel author includes this event despite the possible embarrassment strongly supports the historicity of Jesus's baptism. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 100.
23. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:123. Ferguson writes: "Righteousness was an important concept for Matthew. It often refers to God's saving activity, but here it likely means to obey God's plan. In receiving baptism Jesus identified with the people of Israel to whom John addressed his message and started on a path that led to the cross. He also set an example of obedience for others." Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 102.
24. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1938), 276. Compare to Joseph Smith, Discourse, 29 January 1843, as reported by Franklin D. Richards, p. [13], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-29-january-1843-as-reported-by-franklin-d-richards/3>.
25. Concerning these very verses, Elder McConkie wrote, "Contrary to the false teachings and traditions of sectarianism Jesus personally performed water baptisms so that in all things he might be the great Exemplar. Without question he also performed all other ordinances essential to salvation and exaltation." McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:148.
26. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:146.
27. The Lord taught Alma the Younger this same thing as well: "Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 27:25–29).
28. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 230–31.
29. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 818, s.v. "Day of Pentecost."
30. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 146.
31. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 146–47.
32. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 147.
33. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 2:471–72.
34. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 148.
35. It might be helpful for Latter-day Saints to understand that Joseph Smith and the early Saints of the Restoration would not have read or understood 1 Corinthians 15:29 as anything other than Paul arguing for the reality of the Resurrection until Joseph received his January 1836 revelation. It was through this revelation that Joseph first learned that his brother Alvin, and all who have died without the gospel who would have received it in mortality had they been given the chance, would not be denied the rewards of the gospel in the life to come. The reception of this revelation led to much discussion, pondering, and additional revelation surrounding the performance of proxy ordinances, the earliest being baptism for the dead. Most likely, the Prophet and Saints would not have recognized or made a connection with this verse until sometime during or after the restoration of the doctrine of vicarious ordinances. See also Matthew McBride, "Letters on Baptism for the Dead," in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, <https://history.lds.org/article/doctrine-and-covenants-baptisms-for-the-dead?lang=eng>.

36. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 156.
37. One is in 1 Peter 3:20, a verse that produces a fascinating perspective of the events surrounding Noah, his family, the Flood, and the ark. Often, it is the ark of Noah that is viewed as the object providing salvation to Noah and his family, but verse 20 states that they were “saved by water.” For Noah and his family, the danger was not the Flood. Of course, God needed to preserve them from the Flood to fulfill his covenants and eternal purposes, but for the righteous death is sweet, and Noah as well as his family would eventually die. The real danger was spiritual death; it was the wicked and worldly influences that surrounded them. With this perspective in mind, it was the water of baptism that saved them from the real danger of spiritual death.