

# Baptism: Beginning of a New Life

*Previous articles in this series have covered the vital spiritual tools of prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting and repentance. But to receive the greatest gifts of God, there is another step you must take—the commitment of water baptism.*

by Don Hooser

**T**he greatest gifts anyone can receive come “from above”—from our Creator God (James 1:17). And God offers us two gifts that are by far the most important that any human being can receive in this life. The first gift is the forgiveness of sins. The second is the indwelling presence of God’s Holy Spirit.

In turn, these two gifts make possible the greatest gift of all, which is eternal, glorified life after death in the everlasting Kingdom of God (Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

Countless people are confused, thinking they have already received God’s forgiveness when they haven’t, and thinking they already have God’s Holy Spirit when they haven’t. This article will help you to know one way or the other.

First, it is always *God* who must initiate a relationship with Him. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws [or calls] him” (John 6:44). God calls a person by causing him to hear the true gospel while at the same time opening up his mind to spiritual understanding (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

There is nothing we can possibly do to *earn* eternal life, but God does have *conditions* that we must fulfill. The last article in this series focused on one of those conditions—real heartfelt *repentance* over having disobeyed God’s laws. Another condition is *faith* in God—trusting in Him and believing His Word, the Bible. Jesus Christ emphasized these two conditions during His ministry (Mark 1:15).

## What shall we do?

But for us to receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit, more is required than just repentance and faith. In Acts 2, we read a summary of the apostle Peter’s inspired sermon. He explained that the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ was necessary to pay the penalty for our sins. It is



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our sinfulness that was responsible for His suffering. In essence, “you crucified” Him (Acts 2:36).

Notice the reaction of the listeners: “Now when they heard this, *they were cut to the heart*, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’” (verse 37, emphasis added throughout). They knew God would require them to *do* certain things if they were to be given eternal life.

“Then Peter said to them, ‘*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and *you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*’” (verse 38). Peter made it clear that we *must* receive two things to be reconciled to God—forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

Peter said we must first *repent*. But Peter didn’t mention the other condition,

which is *faith*. Why not? The very question “What shall we do?” showed Peter that the people believed in his message and in the Scriptures. They wanted to know what they should do next to *act* on that faith!

Therefore, once a person mature enough to make important lifelong decisions has a basic spiritual understanding of and belief in the “gospel,” meaning the *good news* of the coming Kingdom of God and His plan of salvation, God urgently desires to see him or her repent and be baptized as soon as is practical. Then he can receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit.

## What is baptism?

The Greek word translated “baptize” is *baptizo*, the common Greek term for *immerse, submerge* or *put into*. So most English Bibles merely anglicize the word



to a slightly different spelling rather than translate it. The important point is that, in the Bible, “baptize” always means *immerse*.

Other authors of the time write of naval battles in which ships were “baptized”—completely sunk—in the sea. Therefore, it is nonsensical to say one can baptize (immerse or submerge) by pouring or sprinkling. The Bible itself proves that baptism meant immersion. John the Baptist needed “*much water*” for baptizing (John 3:23). Jesus, when John baptized Him, “came up immediately *from the water*” (Matthew 3:16). When Philip baptized the eunuch, they “*went down into the water*” (Acts 8:38). Afterwards, “they came up out of the water” (verse 39).

Why is this important? *Because of what baptism represents*. Being put into and under water pictures a burial, and rising from the water pictures a resurrection.

Baptism actually pictures *three* deaths, burials and resurrections. First, baptism symbolizes our faith “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Second, it symbolizes our acknowledgement of the need for our old sinful way of life to be “put to death” and be buried forever (Colossians 3:5; 2:12). And our rising from the water symbolizes our beginning to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-6). Of course our spiritual character isn’t immediately transformed in those few seconds. Baptism is a sign of our lifelong dedication and commitment to that goal.

Third, baptism symbolizes one’s faith in the hope of the literal resurrection to come—“that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15).

### **Baptism: Much more than a ceremony**

Symbolism is important, but baptism is *much more* than symbolism. If you were to ask 100 people who are seeking to be baptized, “Have you ever asked God to forgive you?” probably 99 would say yes. Then ask the 99, “Do you think God answered those prayers and forgave you?” Maybe 98 of them will say yes. Then ask them, “So why be baptized if God has already forgiven you, since Acts 2:38 says that the purpose of baptism is to have your sins forgiven?”

Most people are confused. Even when they realize baptism is a biblical requirement, they think of it as a mere ritual of thanksgiving for God’s forgiveness. But Acts 2:38 states that baptism is a *required condition* for forgiveness. Before forgiveness, God requires this *public profession of commitment* to Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord (meaning *Master*—to rule over our lives, Luke 6:46).

Many have misinterpreted 1 John 1:9, which says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Most people fail to realize that the New Testament epistles were written primarily to Church members—those who had already been baptized. In the epistles, the pronouns “we” and “us” refer to baptized members; “they” and “them” usually refer to nonmembers.

Therefore, 1 John 1:9 tells us that if a person who has received initial forgiveness through baptism sins after that, he does not need to be baptized again and again. Each subsequent time he sins, he only needs to repent of that sin, confess it to God and ask God’s forgiveness—and God will immediately forgive. This is one of the awesome privileges a person has once he has been baptized!

This explains why baptism is *so important!* God holds each person guilty of *every sin he has ever committed* until those sins are blotted out at baptism (Acts 3:19; 22:16). At the moment the repentant person is immersed in water, all his past sins are forgiven! What a joy it is to stand clean before God!

### **The next step: Receive God’s Holy Spirit**

Once a person has been baptized, he is ready to receive God’s Holy Spirit. The Bible shows that the Holy Spirit is the spiritual essence and power that emanates from God the Father and from Jesus Christ. Many are surprised to find that the Bible never mentions a Trinity. Indeed, careful study shows that the traditional formulations of men are quite different from the biblical teaching. (For a definitive scriptural study, read our free booklet *Who Is God?*)

The gift of the Holy Spirit does not come during the baptism. Scripture shows that God gives it immediately afterwards during the *laying on of hands* by one of God’s ministers as he prays for the baptized person to receive the gift of God’s

Spirit (Acts 8:14-17; 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6).

Once you have the Holy Spirit, you have “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). You are “baptized into Christ” (Galatians 3:27). You abide in Christ and He abides in you (1 John 3:24). You are among the “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). You have a “new heart” and are becoming a “new man” (Ezekiel 18:31; Ephesians 4:24).

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27). That “body” is the Church—the “church of God” (Colossians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 1:2). We cannot “join” the Church of God. God adds us to it when He gives us the gift of His Spirit. We are then *members* of God’s Church (1 Corinthians 12:27).

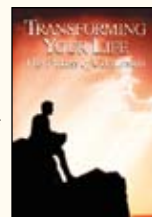
“Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, *he is not His*”—he doesn’t belong to Christ (Romans 8:9). He is not a true Christian or “son of God” (verse 14). To become a real Christian, you must believe, repent, be baptized, experience the laying on of hands from one of God’s ministers, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Once a mature person has spiritual understanding and faith and has repented of his sins, he should not delay baptism. When God is offering you a gift, why not accept it? Jesus warned against rejecting God’s offer: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). As Ananias said to Saul (whose name was changed to Paul), “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16).

After one receives the Holy Spirit, that is when real spiritual growth begins! **GN**

## Recommended Reading

For a thorough explanation of God’s plan for salvation including the subjects of baptism, the Holy Spirit and spiritual growth, request or download our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*. The United Church of God, publisher of *The Good News*, also has many trained ministers who are happy to answer your questions, counsel you for baptism and serve you in any way they can.



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