

## ACTS 8:9-13

### WHEN THEY BELIEVED, THEY WERE BAPTISED

“There was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Book of Acts points up in greater detail than any other book of the New Testament the importance of baptism in the life of the early churches. Luke’s treatise for Theophilus provides readers with a detailed account of the formative days of New Testament churches. Reading this book, we are afforded a glimpse into the life and the practise of the apostolic churches. Though a more thorough theology of baptism can be gleaned from the Letters of Paul than from Acts, Luke’s account demonstrates the importance that was assigned to baptism among the early churches.

Throughout this historic account, each individual who believed the message of life was baptised immediately. Not a single incident is recorded to give comfort to the idea that an individual might have received baptism in order to be saved; rather, because they had already believed, those who had become Christians through faith in Jesus the Christ were baptised. These believers were baptised in order to identify openly as Christians. They sought to identify boldly with the Lord in Whom they had believed. They proclaimed through baptism the Gospel they had believed—that Jesus died, that He was buried and that He was raised from the dead. Simultaneously, they confessed the lifeless nature of their former existence and they affirmed the spiritual vitality they presently enjoyed as result of the New Birth through faith in the Living Son of God.

We Baptists do not baptise our babies—there is absolutely no warrant in Scripture for such practise. Neither ministers nor congregations have power to redeem a person through human effort; hence, there is no salvific merit in baptism. Redemption is offered only through the mercies of Christ and results from faith that He is our sacrifice. Therefore, we cannot baptise those who have no confession of faith in the Risen Son of God since unbelievers have nothing to declare. Beginning with the early days of the New Testament churches, the consistent practise has been to baptise only those who openly and voluntarily confess Christ as Lord; Baptist continue this practise to this day.

Those who were not baptised were not viewed as Christians within the earliest communities of faith. If an individual chose not to publicly confess the mastery of Jesus through baptism, that one was not considered to be His follower. Baptism became the identifying mark that distinguished between those who were committed to following the Master and those who were only exploring the Faith. Refusal to be baptised was *de facto* evidence that the individual was not committed to following “the Way.”

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Messages from this particular text often focus on Simon the sorcerer, especially addressing the sin of simony—the attempt to purchase or to sell ecclesiastical favour. The classic example of simony is the sale of indulgences, a kind of “get out of hell” free card sold for “a nominal fee.” However, the account before us reveals essential truths concerning baptism as practised by the New Testament churches. Together, let’s examine these verses so that together we can learn about baptism as practised among the New Testament churches and as seen through the eyes of the Apostles.

**THE RELATIONSHIP OF BAPTISM TO FAITH** — “When they believed ... they were baptised.” When I read this text, my eyes are drawn immediately to the propinquity of baptism and belief. In the early church, those who believed were baptised. There were no baptismal classes. There was no probationary period. There were no sponsors. There was simply an expectation that each believer would identify openly with the Master. Modern Christendom has complicated the act of the open confession of one’s faith.

Every denomination within Christendom practises baptism for adults who believe. It matters little what communion within Christendom one happens to approach, those seeking baptism will be accommodated. However, in almost all communions there will be either a probationary period or a requirement for instructional classes—even among a growing number of Baptists! I do not doubt that it can be helpful to know the polity and doctrinal position of a given denomination if one intends to unite with a church within a given communion. Thus, I recognise that membership classes can be helpful for the applicant for church membership. However, there is a distinction between what is helpful and what is mandated as though Scripture commanded it.

I stand unalterably opposed to membership classes as a condition of uniting with a congregation, and I stand on very firm ground in opposing baptismal classes for those seeking baptism. What is at first “helpful” soon becomes obligatory and perfunctory. In the case of the Samaritans in our text, “when they believed ... they were baptised.” There was no waiting until a propitious time for them to identify with Christ in His death and resurrection. There was no waiting until those administering baptism were somehow assured of the reality of the confession of those seeking to identify with Christ as Lord. At a fundamental level, I would ask how anyone could know the heart of one confessing Christ. It is only through observation of an individual’s life over a period of time that a measure of confidence can be obtained concerning anyone’s confession; and even then, humility dictates that we confess that the Lord alone knows the heart. Your salvation is not dependent upon my certification; your confession stands judged by your own actions.

Churches are reduced to mere social organisations or transformed into mere legal societies whenever we begin to apply our best ideas for sifting the grain from the chaff or whenever we begin to employ our fertile imaginations in order to set a standard for entry into the fellowship of believers. In the New Testament account, those who believed were baptised; and on the basis of their baptism they were added to the church.

Those who believed and were baptised were from that point forward held accountable for their conduct. If they demonstrated bad character or acted in a manner contrary to sound doctrine, they were rebuked. If admonition failed to secure a return to righteous behaviour, they were excluded from the fellowship. They were not treated disrespectfully or dishonoured, but they were instead treated as though they had never been born from above and thus they were removed from the fellowship of believers.

The high estimate placed on baptism by the early churches is often ignored today. Baptism is not faith, but profession that precluded or ignored baptism is never witnessed. This is not just an argument from silence; it is an observation of fact. Consider a few instances in the Word of the relationship of baptism and faith. Those listeners who received the Apostle's message at Pentecost were convicted by the Spirit of God to ask, "What shall we do?" Preachers today seem inclined to respond, "Believe, and enjoy a warm relationship with Jesus." Peter's answer was pointed and powerful, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ" [ACTS 2:38]. Then we read that "those who received his word were baptised" [ACTS 2:41]. Those who repented of their opposition to Christ were baptised; repentance was demonstrated through baptism.

The Ethiopian eunuch heard "the good news about Jesus" [ACTS 8:35]. As the chariot travelled along they came to some water and the eunuch exclaimed to Philip, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptised" [ACTS 8:37]? There is not a word concerning baptism until this man wishes to proclaim his identification with Christ. Philip had spoken of Christ and of His sacrifice. The eunuch believed this message, and believing, he sought to identify with the message he had received.

When Cornelius and those gathered with him in his house believed, Peter "commanded them to be baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ" [ACTS 10:48]. The Lord opened Lydia's heart, and she was immediately baptised [ACTS 16:14, 15]. Crispus and his entire household believed, and they were immediately baptised [ACTS 18:8]. Likewise, when Saul of Tarsus believed, he was baptised immediately [ACTS 22:16]. The obvious practise of New Testament churches was that those who believed were baptised *immediately*. They were not baptised in order to become Christians, but because they had become Christians they were baptised.

Today, churches separate faith and baptism until there is no longer any correlation between the two concepts. Baptism becomes just another ritual, much like recitation of an oath to join a civic club or learning a secret handshake. Instead of symbolising and expressing the faith that has transformed the believer, it becomes merely the means of admission to a religious society. Again, so that no one is misled, I am compelled to insist that though baptism is not identical to faith, it is the biblically anticipated expression of faith. Baptism does not save, but those who are saved will want to be baptised.

It is vital that I stress the truth that baptism does not—indeed, cannot—save. There are a plethora of churches claiming that baptism washes away sin. However, one verse of Scripture should forever settle that particular issue. **1 JOHN 1:7** informs us that "the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin." If we have believed in the Saviour who sacrificed Himself because of us, there is no sin to be cleansed when we come for baptism. Baptism is a declaration of what has already occurred; it is not performed in order to secure what is already given.

It is wrong to say that baptism is the means by which one accesses the forgiveness of sin, for Scripture is very clear that propitiation is realised through faith. Paul, writing the Roman Christians declared, "the righteousness of God has been manifested ... through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" [ROMANS 3:21-25]. The atoning blood of Christ is reached by faith, and not by water.

Baptism is a testimony of faith. Baptism is received as the believer declares his or her faith in all that Jesus has done for her. It is doubtful that one who refuses baptism understands the significance of Christ's sacrifice, for if she truly understood that He has conquered death, she would willingly and with alacrity welcome the opportunity to declare her faith and identify as a follower of Him who loved her and gave Himself for her. Baptism does not save, but those who are saved will want to be baptised.

**THE ELEMENTS OF BAPTISM** — Since baptism is important, perhaps it would be beneficial to review the elements of biblical baptism. Not many years ago, almost any Baptist bearing that worthy name could recite without hesitation the elements of biblical baptism. Today, it is increasingly surprising should one find a practising Baptist prepared to define biblical baptism. Consequently, a disturbing number of churches bearing the name "Baptist," boast membership rolls that are filled with unbaptised individuals.

The elements essential to biblical baptism are ***a proper candidate, a proper administrator, a proper mode*** and ***a proper motive***. The first element in biblical baptism is the requirement for ***a proper candidate***. Reducing the possibilities to the minimum, either the one baptised wishes to become a Christian, or the one baptised is already a Christian. Either baptism has merit through performance of the ordinance and thus in some way contributes to salvation, or baptism expresses what has already transpired in the life of the one baptised.

According to Scripture, we come to the waters of baptism as a new creation, and not in order to become a new creation. If we will be biblical, we will not baptise those who wish to become Christians, nor will we baptise our babies in order to make them Christians. We will dedicate ourselves to evangelise those outside the Faith, and we will pledge ourselves to instruct our children in righteousness, ensuring that they learn early of the love of God and the mercies of Christ in anticipation that they will seek Him, coming to faith early in life and thus avoiding a life of dissipation and loss.

Again, biblical baptism demands ***a proper administrator***. I do not mean by this that only an ordained minister—whatever that term may mean—may administer baptism. Baptism is a church ordinance, conducted on behalf of a New Testament congregation as testimony to the harvest that results because of the witness provided by the membership. The congregation may appoint whom it wills to administer baptism, and the congregation may receive the baptism of any individual baptised by one of its members if it so desires. What is especially in view is that an obedient Christian—one who has himself or herself been baptised—administers the baptism as a testimony of the new believer's faith.

In short, one who has never been baptised cannot baptise. Irregular rites, whether they be called "baptism" or identified by some other name, do not qualify the individual to baptise in the New Testament manner. Those who were baptised in order to become Christians, those who were baptised as infants, those who were wetted through pouring or sprinkling, are unbaptised and thus disqualified from administering baptism.

Just as baptism demands a proper candidate and a proper administrator, so biblical baptism demands ***a proper mode***. It is an unfortunate truth that when the translators of the King James Bible provided that otherwise fine translation, they attempted to mask the meaning conveyed by several Greek terms, including the term for baptism. This was because of conflicts then swirling in the Church of England concerning the mode of baptism; so, they transliterated the Greek word ***baptizo*** into English, rendering it ***baptise***.

Imagine that had these gifted men chosen to attempt to avoid conflict over methods of discipleship. Imagine that **MATTHEW 28:19** were treated in this same fashion. Had they been consistent, that passage would read, “Go therefore and **matheteusitise** all nations.” Of course, they might have justified such an effort because of a desire to maintain unity within the denomination and to avoid giving offence; nevertheless, today we would be discussing “methods of matheteusitising” when we speak of discipleship.

That is precisely what was done with the word *baptizo*, which means “to dip,” “to immerse,” “to submerge.” “Baptise” is an anglicised Greek word, and not a Greek word translated into English. What does the word mean in English? If it means “to sprinkle,” we may discuss modes of sprinkling; if the word means “to pour,” we may speak of modes of pouring; if the word means “to immerse,” we may speak of modes of immersing; but we cannot in strict intelligence speak of modes of baptism.<sup>2</sup>

I don’t wish to assail you by citing too many texts in support of this position, but it may be helpful for you to realise that scholars conversant with the Greek tongue and representing a variety of denominations testify consistently to the meaning of the Word. You would expect a Baptist to argue for immersion as the only acceptable mode for the rite. A. T. Robertson, long professor at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, wrote: “It may be remarked that no Baptist has written a lexicon of the Greek language, and yet the standard lexicons, like that of Liddell and Scott, uniformly give the meaning of Greek [*baptizo*] as ‘dip,’ ‘immerse.’ They do not give ‘pour’ or ‘sprinkle,’ nor has anyone ever adduced an instance where this verb means ‘pour’ or ‘sprinkle.’ The presumption is therefore in favour of ‘dip’ in the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup>

James Denney, a Presbyterian churchman, provided an excellent commentary on Romans. Concerning Paul’s argument for the symbolism inherent in baptism, Denney writes, “There is no argument in [**ROMANS 6:1-13**], unless all Christians were baptised.”<sup>4</sup> Later, in that same commentary, Denney wrote: “[W]e were buried with Him (in the act of immersion) through that baptism into His death—burial being regarded as the natural sequence of death...”<sup>5</sup> Yet again, commenting on that same passage, Denney provides us further insight. “[B]aptism, inasmuch as one emerges from the water after being immersed, is a [*homoíōma*—likeness] of resurrection as well as of death.”<sup>6</sup>

J. B. Lightfoot, Anglican prelate and scholar, in his commentary on Colossians and Philemon, stated, “Baptism is the grave of the old man, and the birth of the new. As he sinks beneath the baptismal waters, the believer buries there all his corrupt affections and past sins; as he emerges thence, he rises regenerate, quickened to new hopes and a new life. This it is, because it is not only the crowning act of his own faith but also the seal of God’s adoption and the earnest of God’s Spirit. Thus baptism is an image of his participation both in the death and in the resurrection of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted for this point to the writings of C. A. Stakely, **Why Immersion and not Sprinkling or Pouring**, in J. M. Frost, **Baptist Why and Why Not** (Baptist Sunday School Board, Nashville, TN 1900) 173

<sup>3</sup> A. T. Robertson, **Baptism (Baptist Interpretation)** (art.) in **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**, (electronic text edition, 1998, Epiphany Software)

<sup>4</sup> James Denney, **Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans**, in W. Robertson Nicoll, **The Expositor’s Greek Testament, Volume Two** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, reprint ed. 1976) 632

<sup>5</sup> Denney, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Denney, *op. cit.*, 633

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Barber Lightfoot, **Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1879) 184

Bishop Moule, Anglican scholar and commentator, wrote, “The immersion of the baptised (the primeval and ideal form of the rite...) is undoubtedly here in view.”<sup>8</sup>

F. B. Westcott, another Anglican scholar, said of Paul’s words in **COLOSSIANS 2:12**, “The Apostle ... reminds [the Colossians] of the ‘thing signified’ ... ‘a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness.’ The ‘burial’ under the water is the pledge of effective ‘death’; and the ‘rising again’ is the symbol of the new ‘*pneumatic*’ life.”<sup>9</sup>

Anglican scholar, H. B. Swete, commenting on the purpose of Jesus in journeying to Jordan in order to be baptised, notes that Mark’s account is “with the added thought of the immersion, which gives vividness to the scene.”<sup>10</sup>

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, asserts that immersion was the ancient method of baptising.<sup>11</sup>

The noted Reformed scholar, Philip Schaff, is open in confessing of baptism, “The usual FORM of baptism was immersion. This is inferred from the original meaning of the Greek βαπτίζειν and βαπτισμός; from the analogy of John’s baptism in the Jordan; from the apostles’ comparison of the sacred rite with the miraculous passage of the Red Sea, with the escape of the ark from the flood, with a cleansing and refreshing bath, and with burial and resurrection; finally, from the general custom of the ancient church which prevails in the East to this day.” Then, in a footnote, he admits, “Compare the German *taufen*, the English dip. Grimm defines βαπτίζω (the frequentative of βάπτω): ‘*immergo, submergo*,’ Liddell and Scott: ‘*to dip in or under the water*.’”<sup>12</sup>

Tradition trumps truth in most communions when we consider baptism. However, if we will be true to the Word of God and if we will be obedient to the design of the Lord Jesus who gave us the ordinance, we have no choice but to immerse those who wish to picture Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. Likewise, if they wish to confess the death of their old nature and the new birth to new life, they will need to be buried in water and raised from the watery grave into which they had been lowered.

Lastly, biblical baptism anticipates **a proper motive**. One is properly baptised in obedience to the command of the Master. Jesus called for those who would follow Him to identify through baptism. Baptism is the initial act of one who is being discipled: “Make disciples of all nations, baptising them...” [**MATTHEW 28:19a**].

The Samaritans were proper candidates for baptism since the text clearly states, “When they believed Philip as he preached the good news about the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised” [**ACTS 8:12**]. They had a proper administrator in that Philip was himself baptised and a member of the Jerusalem church. He did not hesitate to certify his labours by inviting the Apostles to observe the converts [**ACTS 8:14, 15**]. The mode of their baptism was proper because they were baptised [immersed], and not sprinkled. The verb Doctor Luke uses is βαπτίζω—immerse—and not παντίζω—sprinkle. Again, the motive was proper, as revealed through the exposure of Simon because he held improper motives, designed only to exalt himself.

<sup>8</sup> H. C. G. Moule, *Studies in Colossians & Philemon* (Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI 1893) 105

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Brooke Westcott, *Colossians: A Letter to Asia* (Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, Inc., Minneapolis, MN 1914) 107

<sup>10</sup> Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI 1977) 8

<sup>11</sup> John Wesley, *Wesley’s Commentary* (electronic text edition, 1999, Epiphany Software)

<sup>12</sup> Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Logos Research Systems, Inc., Oak Harbor, WA: 1997)

**IMPROPER MOTIVES FOR BAPTISM** — Since we know what determines whether a baptism is proper or improper, and since we know that Christ calls all who believe to be baptised, why is it among the churches of our Lord that the ordinance is often treated as though it was optional? Why do professed believers resist obedience to the command of the One whom they call Master of their lives? Why do some believers yet refuse biblical baptism, holding that a ritual performed when they were unconscious infants will suffice as obedience? Why do preachers neglect teaching the congregations of Christ Jesus about the importance of the initial ordinance? These questions demand answers; and answers, if provided, must come from the lives of each one professing to follow the Master.

I am duty bound to caution against improper motives for anyone seeking baptism. Simon clearly held improper motives when he requested and received baptism at the hand of Philip. It is wrong for believers today to seek baptism in hope of personal gain, just as it was wrong in an earlier day for Simon. Honouring the Lord Christ, loyalty to His cause, and obedience to His call constitutes the only proper motive for anyone seeking to identify with the Risen Son of God.

It is despicable and detestable to think that anyone would use religion as a means to advance his or her personal interests. Nevertheless, such happens too frequently for me to say that it is rare. Even among professed preachers of the Word, a virulent strain of simony infects far too many; and even those who begin well in the Christian life are not immune to the insidious infection if they fail to keep their eyes of the Master.

I recall a man who insisted on being called the “Chairman of the Church.” Power had blinded him to the corruption of his soul. Another man in yet another congregation let me know that he was the one who paid my salary, and if I dared hold him accountable he would leave and even remove the hand dryer from the washroom. His manipulative attitude masked a heart contaminated by simony. Petty tyrants such as these exist among the churches because such Lilliputian individuals seldom are tolerated within the world. Since the flock seeks to be harmless, it is susceptible to infiltration and injury.

Lynda and I were disgusted and shocked as we sat at breakfast with a pastoral team on one occasion. They served a large congregation in a major western city. Their character became immediately obvious when they began to eat—like hogs or dogs—without offering thanks for God’s rich provision. As we dined, they laughed at the gullibility of the people they purported to serve; they ridiculed the simple believers and mocked the efforts of their own people to be holy and godly. As the meal progressed, it became increasingly evident that their only consideration in being “pastors” was a light workload and a fat pay cheque. I was repulsed by their mocking attitude and made my displeasure known. There is only one conclusion for these hirelings, they were infected—perhaps beyond cure—with simony and their souls were blasted and withered.

It is decidedly improper to be baptised in an attempt to fit in with others. Youth, especially, seem susceptible to this error. Many people were baptised when they were youths, and for no other reason than that their peers were being baptised. We must caution our youth to avoid either of two grievous errors—refusing baptism because they might not be considered “cool,” and being baptised because their friends are being baptised. Our youth should be encouraged to believe Christ and to stand for Christ, openly confessing their faith independently and boldly identifying with the Saviour. There is far too much surrender to the crowd mentality—on either side of the equation.

Associated with this error of “following the crowd” is another error that construes baptism as important primarily to permit one to become a member of the church. Baptism is the front door to the church, to be sure. Those who are unbaptised are not to be accepted into membership in the congregation, and those who receive baptism are indeed considered members of the congregation in which they were baptised; but baptism received solely, or even primarily, in order to be a church member exposes an improper motive for identifying with the Master.

It is assuredly wrong to depreciate the call of Christ, refusing to be obedient to His call to identify through baptism. It is wrong to refuse baptism because one does not wish to hurt the feelings of a parent or of a grandparent, or because one fears what business associates may think, or because of one’s own stubborn pride. I trust that such descriptions do not apply to any of us sharing worship on this day. Surely, we are men and women of honour, willing to do all that Christ calls us to do. Surely, we believe His Word and we wish to glorify Him through fulfilling His command.

As an aside of some considerable import and related to this discussion, I marvel at people who insist on their “right” to participate at the Lord’s Table, and who yet reject His first call to obedience in baptism. The unbaptised have no place at the Lord’s Table, and those who insist that it is their right are obligated to demonstrate through Scripture why they should be invited to share in that holy meal. Perhaps it is time for Christians again to set the ordinances in the honourable place that Christ intended them to be.

If you have proven obedient to Christ through baptism since you believed, live in such a way that you honour Him. If you have yet to obey His call to be baptised since you believed, what excuse can you give to the King of Kings? How can you permit yourself to be called by His Name and yet refuse to identify openly with Him? What excuse can you give for refusing the Master’s call to identify as His obedient follower?

This message concludes with a call to obedience—obedience to the call of the Master to believe His message of life. Have you been saved? Have you believed the Good News that Jesus died because of your sin and that He was raised for your justification? Your first need is to be born from above and into the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the message we deliver to all mankind. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Again, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

If you have believed this message of life, I am obligated to ask whether have you obeyed the call of Christ the Master to identify with Him through baptism as a believer—immersion that pictures your faith? All who believe are to be “buried ... with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” We are to be “united with Him in a death like His, knowing that we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His” [see **ROMANS 6:4, 5**]. Have you obeyed this call to open identification?

I plead with each listener to receive this invitation to follow the Master boldly. Believe that He died because of your sin and that He rose from your justification. Believing, openly embrace Him as Master of life, identifying with Him in baptism as He commands. Do all that He commands, and do it now. Amen.