How Did We Get Here?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History



Lesson 6

Baptism

What does baptism accomplish?

Scripture quotations: NASB 1977

The Command and Practice of Baptism

Matthew 28:18–20 · Acts 2:38–41 · Acts 8:36–38

“Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 28:19 (NASB 1977)

- Jesus places baptism within the work of making disciples.
- Acts joins repentance, faith, baptism, and reception into the church’s fellowship.
- The earliest Christian mission treats baptism as the expected response to the gospel.

Baptism and Salvation

The New Testament uses language stronger than “public testimony” alone

Acts 2:38	Repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and the gift of the Spirit
Acts 22:16	“Be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name”
Romans 6:3–4	Baptized into Christ’s death and raised to walk in newness of life
Galatians 3:27	Those baptized into Christ have “clothed” themselves with Christ

Any theology of baptism must account for the full force of these passages.

Short quotations: NASB 1977

Does the Outward Act Save?

1 Corinthians 10:1–5

SHARED PRIVILEGES

All passed through the sea.
All were under the cloud.
All shared spiritual food and drink.

COVENANT IDENTIFICATION

Paul says they were “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”

SOBERING RESULT

“Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased.” Their bodies fell in the wilderness.

Participation in an outward covenant event did not guarantee God’s approval.

Paul’s warning challenges presumption. It does not, by itself, settle every question about Christian baptism.

Short quotations: NASB 1977

What Does Peter Mean by “Baptism Saves”?

1 Peter 3:16–22

“Baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

1 Peter 3:21 (NASB 1977)

NOT EXTERNAL WASHING ALONE

Peter explicitly distinguishes baptism’s saving meaning from washing dirt off the body.

AN APPEAL OR PLEDGE

The rare Greek word may mean appeal, request, or pledge. Either way, conscience and Godward response matter.

THROUGH CHRIST’S RESURRECTION

The saving ground lies in Jesus Christ and His resurrection, not in water considered by itself.

Sacramental traditions join the water and promised grace closely. Many evangelicals stress Peter’s distinction between the sign and the saving reality.

Baptism and the Work of the Spirit

The New Testament joins water and conversion closely without making the rite mechanical

Acts 10:44–48	Cornelius’s household receives the Holy Spirit before water baptism. Peter then commands baptism.
1 Corinthians 1:14–17	Paul distinguishes his primary commission to preach the gospel from the act of baptizing.
Romans 6:3–4	Baptism identifies believers with Christ’s death and resurrection and a new way of life.

The sign matters because Christ commanded it. The saving power belongs to God, who gives the Spirit and unites believers to Christ.

What Does Baptism Signify?

Several biblical themes converge in one ordinance

Baptism visibly identifies a person with Jesus Christ and His people.

The saving reality pictured

- Union with Christ
- Death and resurrection with Christ
- Cleansing and forgiveness

The public meaning enacted

- Reception into the visible church
- Public identification with Christ
- A Godward response of faith and conscience

No single image exhausts the New Testament's teaching about baptism.

Who Should Be Baptized?

Credobaptism and paedobaptism read the same New Testament through different covenant frameworks

Credobaptism

- The recurring narrative pattern places repentance or faith before baptism.
- No New Testament text unambiguously describes an infant baptism.
- The new covenant community is defined by personal knowledge of God and professed faith.

Paedobaptism

- God’s covenant dealings ordinarily include believers and their children.
- Household baptisms, Acts 2:39, and 1 Corinthians 7:14 support family inclusion.
- Colossians 2:11–12 links circumcision and baptism within union with Christ.

Both positions call for faith and discipleship. They disagree about when the covenant sign should be given and how children belong to the visible church.

Baptism and the Covenant

The deepest dispute concerns continuity between the old and new covenant communities

Continuity emphasized

Children received the covenant sign under Abraham. Paedobaptists see baptism as the corresponding new covenant sign, with Acts 2:39 and household baptisms preserving the family pattern.

Discontinuity emphasized

Credobaptists stress that the new covenant is constituted by those who know the Lord. The sign therefore follows personal repentance and faith rather than physical descent.

Colossians 2:11–12 connects “circumcision made without hands” with burial and resurrection in baptism. The passage establishes a close relationship, but Christians disagree about whether it directly makes baptism the replacement for circumcision.

Cf. 1 Peter 3. In both passages, the author emphasizes that it is not the physical act or outward ritual that is effective, but the inward reality.

How Should Baptism Be Administered?

Immersion, pouring, and sprinkling

IMMERSION

The ordinary sense of baptizō and New Testament scenes of entering and leaving water strongly support immersion.

POURING

Biblical cleansing and Spirit imagery can involve pouring. Many traditions use pouring as a valid administration.

SPRINKLING

Priestly and covenant cleansing texts use sprinkling. Reformed and some other traditions accept it.

The Didache, chapter 7

This early church manual prefers baptism in running water, allows other water when necessary, and permits pouring water three times on the head when sufficient water is unavailable.

Baptism in the Early Church

The record grows clearer across the second and third centuries

c. 100	**Didache**	Preparation and fasting, Trinitarian baptism, running water preferred, pouring allowed.
c. 155	**Justin Martyr**	Instructed converts pray and fast before baptism. Justin uses regeneration and remission language.
c. 200	**Tertullian**	Strong baptismal theology, yet urges delay in some cases, especially for little children.
early 3rd c.	**Origen**	Reports infant baptism as received church tradition. The relevant works survive largely in later Latin translation.

Early sources connect baptism closely with forgiveness and new birth. Explicit evidence for baptizing children emerges, but the record does not show a single uniform practice from the start.

Augustine and the Medieval Church

Augustine gave infant baptism a powerful anti-Pelagian rationale, but he did not invent the practice

Augustine, early fifth century

- Infants share Adam’s fallen condition even before committing personal sins.
- Baptism remits original sin and incorporates the child into Christ and the church.
- The controversy with Pelagius made infant baptism central evidence for inherited sin and the priority of grace.

Medieval Western development

- Infant baptism becomes the ordinary pastoral practice.
- The church systematizes baptism as a sacrament that confers grace, remits sin, and leaves an indelible character.
- Later scholastic categories explain sacramental efficacy more precisely than Augustine himself did.

Development means both continuity and clarification: baptismal regeneration language and child baptism predate Augustine, while his doctrine of original sin reshaped their explanation in the West.

The Reformation Divides

Reformers agreed that Christ commanded baptism and disagreed about recipients and efficacy

Luther	A means of grace that gives forgiveness and salvation according to God’s promise. Infant baptism retained; faith receives the gift.
Zwingli	A covenant sign and public pledge rather than an instrument that automatically conveys regenerating grace. Infant baptism retained.
Calvin	A sign and seal in which God truly offers what He signifies. Efficacy is not mechanically tied to the moment. Covenant children included.
Anabaptists	Baptism follows repentance and faith and marks a gathered church of professing disciples. Infant baptism rejected.

The baptism debate now exposes deeper disagreements about grace, faith, covenant, and the nature of the church.

What Christians Believe Today

Representative confessional positions; practice within each family can vary

Catholic	Sacrament of regeneration and incorporation into Christ; infants baptized; ordinarily necessary for salvation.
Orthodox	Sacramental new birth and church incorporation; infants commonly baptized by triple immersion and then chrismated.
Lutheran	Means of grace that delivers God’s promise of forgiveness and the Spirit; infants included.
Reformed / Presbyterian	Covenant sign and seal; children of believers included; grace is not automatic or tied to the moment.
Methodist / Wesleyan	Sacrament and sign of prevenient grace and church incorporation; infants included; accounts of regeneration vary.
Baptist	Ordinance for professing believers, normally by immersion; signifies union with Christ and does not cause regeneration.

Labels summarize official tendencies, not every congregation or theologian.

Tertullian and John Stott

Two clarifications about baptism

Tertullian: delay reveals an existing practice

- In On Baptism 18, Tertullian counsels delay according to a person’s condition, disposition, and age, especially for “little children.”
- His counsel makes sense only if Christians in his setting already practiced or seriously proposed baptizing children.
- The passage supplies early evidence for child baptism, while also showing that its timing was contested rather than uniform.

John Stott: water and Spirit belong together

- Spirit baptism belongs to Christian initiation. Stott rejects the idea that only some Christians receive it through a later experience.
- Water baptism is the commanded outward sign and seal of forgiveness and the Spirit’s gift.
- The New Testament closely associates repentance, faith, baptism, forgiveness, and the Spirit without reducing them to one mechanical event.

Baptism should neither be trivialized as an optional symbol nor treated as a substitute for repentance, faith, or the Spirit’s regenerating work.

What Does Scripture Require Us to Believe?

Return to the three opening questions

1	**What does baptism signify?**	Union with Christ, His death and resurrection, cleansing, forgiveness, and public identification with His people.
2	**Does baptism itself convey saving grace?**	Scripture joins baptism and salvation closely while denying that an outward act guarantees God’s approval. Traditions explain that relationship differently.
3	**Who should receive baptism?**	The New Testament commands baptism and normally shows it following faith. Paedobaptists argue that covenant continuity also includes believers’ children.

Baptism is commanded, Christ-centered, and never empty of meaning. Our conclusions should account for every biblical text and distinguish the outward sign from the saving work of God.