

What is Baptism?

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The subject of baptism is one of much discussion in the religious world. There are, unfortunately, many “religious” people who are mistaken in their understanding of this important subject. The vast confusion over baptism has been illustrated recently on our weekly radio program. The subject and our beliefs about it have come into question repeatedly. Let’s consider briefly what the Bible teaches about baptism.

A caller a few weeks ago suggested that baptism was not necessary for salvation because of an experience she had as a teenager. This person claimed to have been undoubtedly saved because of a feeling that came on her while she lay in bed. This, she claimed, proved that baptism was unnecessary. As wonderful as the feeling must have been for this individual, it cannot change what the Bible says about the importance of baptism for salvation. I Peter 3:21 says, “*The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” This passage tells us the purpose of baptism—our salvation! We must, therefore, be baptized to be saved.

The simplicity of the above passage is hard to refute, and many are willing to agree that baptism is necessary for salvation. The next question raised, however, is “What type of baptism is being referenced in this passage?” Many would claim that the baptism referenced in I Peter 3:21 is the baptism of the Holy Spirit and is not water baptism. A caller who apparently held to this view called the radio program and sought to use John 3:5 to defend his position. In John 3:5, we read, “*Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*” From the phrase “*born...of the Spirit*”, our caller hoped to show that we must receive Holy Spirit baptism to be saved. This conclusion, however, is invalid for many reasons.

Holy Spirit baptism, as it is described in the New Testament, only occurred twice (Acts 2 and Acts 10). This type of baptism was unique and served a special purpose at the beginning of the church. Furthermore, in the case of the Gentiles who were baptized with the Holy Spirit in Acts 10, water baptism was still required (Acts 10:45-48). No one in the New Testament was ever commanded to be baptized by the Holy Spirit nor were there given any instructions about how this process might be carried out. Instead, we see repeatedly throughout the book of Acts that believers were commanded to be baptized in water for the remission of sins.

What, then, can we conclude about the phrase “*born of water and of the Spirit*” in John 3:5? The answer can be found quickly by looking at a few verses. Ephesians 5:26 and Titus 3:5 show us the vital importance of both water and the Holy Spirit in our salvation. The Holy Spirit shows us, through the written pages of the scriptures, God’s eternal plan for our salvation and teaches us the response that we must have to take advantage of God’s plan—water baptism. Through this process, we are “*born of water and of the Spirit*” and can “*enter into the kingdom of God*”!