

Every Baptism in Acts

Turn to Acts 1. Today we'll go through every time Acts mentions baptism in water. The first reason for this is just so you will get a feel for how the Scripture speaks about baptism.

A bigger reason though is so that we will understand more clearly what happens when WE decide to become Christians, when WE become followers of the Lord. We'll look quickly at many stories today, but they are not just old stories.

By these stories the Bible is telling US what has happened to US. These stories in Acts are also OUR stories, telling us what happened to us.

In one way, my own story is nothing like these stories. I grew up hearing the gospel, that Jesus came to save us, and bring eternal life. As long as I can remember, I have known that, and trusting in God was a no-brainer. Why would anyone say no to an offer like that? So I have a faith story, but I don't remember any conversion story. There is no story like that in Acts.

On the other hand, these stories in Acts ARE my story, they tell me what really happened, and how to understand myself, and they do that for all of you, too. These stories are in the Bible so WE will understand OUR faith, and what makes US disciples of Jesus the Lord.

John's Baptism John the Baptist comes up in Acts several times. Mark and Luke use the same words to summarize John: *John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

According to this line, John preached a particular kind of baptism: a baptism of repentance, which means deciding to live in God's ways, for the forgiveness of sins. What's interesting to me is that it does not say he preached repentance. Close, but not quite. He preached a certain baptism: a baptism where people repented and God forgave their sins. (Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3)

Acts 1:21-22 This is the story of Jesus' disciples finding a replacement for Judas. Peter led this and said: *Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²²beginning from the baptism of John to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.*

The ministry of Jesus began with the baptism of John. Baptism is important, again, it does not say the Lord's ministry began with John, or even with the preaching of John, but with the baptism of John.

Acts 2:37-38 Peter preached a fine sermon on Pentecost. We'll pick it up after the sermon with the response of the people who had listened: *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

What shall we do? In Peter’s response, four things are a tight unit. Acts keeps these four together: To come to God, people do two things: 1, repent, and 2, be baptized in the name of Jesus. Then God does two things: 1, he forgives our sins, and 2, he gives us the Holy Spirit.

Peter sounds sort of like John the Baptist here, doesn’t he? John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Peter says the same, and adds a bit. Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. But he adds two things: now we are baptized in Jesus’ name, and now God gives us the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:40-41 These is Peter continuing on the same day: *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”*⁴¹ *Those who accepted his message were baptized.*

Those who accepted his message were baptized. We understand that these people also repented, and God forgave their sins, and they received the Holy Spirit, even those this are not actually mentioned. Baptism, mentioned by itself, can summarize also repenting and being forgiven and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:12 In Acts 8, Philip went to Samaria, and preached the gospel there. Jews and Samaritans did not get along well at all, they hated each other, despised each other, deep racial prejudice going both ways. But in Acts 1:8 Jesus said the Spirit would cause witness in Samaria too.

V12 But when [the Samaritans] believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Who was baptized? The Samaritans. When? When they believed Philip speaking the gospel.

Acts 8:15-16 *When [Peter and John] arrived [in Samaria], they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*

I will read v16 again: *the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.* We’ve already been told that they’ve been baptized. Why does Acts say that to us again?

Because usually when people were baptized, they received the Spirit, but this time that did not happen. Only here in Acts is the Spirit is delayed a few days after baptism in Jesus’ name. “Jesus’ name” is common in Acts, but it’s not formula, it is a symbol of the presence of Jesus here and now. Baptized into Jesus’ name means joined to Jesus, something close to that.

Think about the hostility between Jews and Samaritans. It seems that the Lord delayed sending the Spirit because this made tied two hostile groups of people together. The Jewish apostles saw that the Samaritans did received the Holy Spirit, but not without the apostles, so the Jewish apostles knew that the Samaritans were under their wing, under their spiritual care.

And the Samaritans, for their part, saw that they did not receive the Holy Spirit until the Jewish apostles came and laid hands on them and prayed for them, so they also understand that they were tied to the Jerusalem church, and they under the leadership of the Jewish apostles.

Acts 8:36-38 Philip left Samaria and met an Ethiopian eunuch, and explained the gospel to him. *As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"¹³⁷ ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

Acts does not tell us that Philip said anything about baptism, but he must have. And there was no waiting. We do not read about repentance here, or forgiveness, or the Holy Spirit, we just read about baptism, but we are right to assume the rest of those as well. The Ethiopian when on his way rejoicing!

Acts 9:18-19 The Lord met Saul/Paul about midday, walking on the road to Damascus. The Lord said to Paul, "Go to Damascus and you will be told what to do" (v6).

Paul was blinded by the light. He did not eat the rest of that day. He did not eat the next day either. That next day was probably the day that the Lord told Ananias to go talk to Paul. On the third day, Ananias came to Paul and prayed that he would see again.

Now to 9:18. *Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.*

First Ananias prayed that Paul would see again, then Paul did not eat, but rather was baptized, then after he baptism he ate again, and then he felt better. Do you get the feeling that they thought baptism was more important than we think it is? I do. No mention of forgiveness, or the Spirit, but we assume those happened as well.

Acts 10:37 This is another story of Peter going into an unclean Gentile home, Cornelius' home, and preaching the gospel there. I want you to see again that the ministry of Jesus began with the baptism that John preached: v37 *You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached.*

Acts 10:47-48 A few verses later, while Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and his friends and family who were listening to Peter. These people started prophesying and praising God, while Peter preached, and Peter could not finish his sermon!

When things settled down, what are the first words out of Peter's mouth? Baptism! V47: *"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."*⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This story tells us several things. One, as we've already seen several times, water baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit normally went together. Usually it was first baptism, then the Spirit, but the Spirit can do as he pleases, and here the Spirit does not wait for baptism.

I suspect that this is often the case for children who grow up in the church and trust in Christ long before they are baptized. They give clear evidence of the Spirit in their lives, too. But in Acts these two are clearly joined to each other. I don't actually understand how all this works, people, but I want these Scriptures to guide us.

Have you noticed anything yet in Acts to teach us that baptism is a sign to the world of our faith? There has not been anything, nor will there be. Nor in the rest of the NT. Repentance is our response to God, and so is faith our response to God, and so is baptism our response to God. Baptism seems to be what God uses to join us to Christ.

If no one had ever told us that baptism was a sign to the world of our faith, nothing in these dozen or so stories of Acts would teach us that. If no one had told us that, we would assume baptism was for God, just like repentance is for God, and faith is for God. Rest of NT the same. I think we basically made that up out of thin air, for reasons not clear to me. Baptism is for God.

Acts 13:24 We are now on the Paul's first missionary journey, he and Barnabas are in a synagogue, preaching Christ to the Jews, and also God-fearing Gentiles who were there. Paul was summarizing the ministry of Jesus. Here's v24: *Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel.*

John preached two things: repentance and baptism, apparently an inseparable pair. Acts speaks of John the Baptist quite a few times, and never without including John's baptism.

Acts 16:14-15 *One of those listening [to Paul in Philippi] was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.*¹⁵ *When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.*

"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Is that not a wonderful line? This is the story of every single follower of Christ. At some early point in my life, the message about Jesus was passed on to me, and the Lord opened my heart to respond to the message. And it is true for every one of you, too, that follows the Lord.

Lydia and her household were baptized. That means they repented, and received forgiveness of sins, and also rec'd the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit is not mentioned, just kindness to believers.

Acts 16:30-34 Later in Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten with sticks and thrown in prison, and then at midnight an earthquake opened all the prison doors. We'll pick it up in v30: *[The jailor] then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.*

After the jailor heard the gospel, what happened? First, he gave first aid to the wounds of Paul and Silas from the beating they received, then he and all his household were baptized, still in the middle of the night, then the jailor brought them into his house and shared a meal with them, still in the night. And he and his household were filled with joy because they had believed in God.

There are two conversion stories from Philippi, Lydia and her household, the jailor and his household. Both mention baptism, neither mention the Holy Spirit at all.

The story of the Ethiopian was like that, too. But the Ethiopian had joy, that's the evidence of the Spirit, and Lydia wanted to share her house with the missionaries, that's evidence of the Spirit, and the jailor did both: he cared for their wounds, and fed them, and they had joy because of their faith, which apparently are signs that they also had received the Spirit.

Acts 18:8 *Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.*

Acts 18:25 (Apollos knew accurately about Jesus, but only the baptism of John). He knew about Jesus, but it seems he did not know about baptism in the name of Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila taught him more fully. The Scripture considers wrong baptism a problem worth noting.

Acts 19:1b-6 *[In Ephesus, Paul] found some disciples² and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"*

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

³ *So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"*

"John's baptism," they replied.

⁴ *Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus."⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.*

Paul's first question: "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" These people believe in the God of Israel, and Paul has talked with them and knows that, but there are gaps somewhere and Paul is trying to figure out the problem. Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

They answer that they never heard of the Holy Spirit. So, Paul's second question: *Then what baptism did you receive?* They obviously have a Holy Spirit problem, so Paul asked them about their baptism. Thirty years ago, I was just beginning to teach NT at seminary, I read that question and was baffled. What was Paul thinking?

Paul obviously thinks baptism in Jesus' name is the normal way to receive the Holy Spirit. In my mind, that was plain and simple bad theology. Which means that in fact **I** had bad theology. This Scripture, that second question in particular, more than any one text in the Bible, made me throw out much of what I believed about baptism and start reading Acts more carefully.

So, if they have a Spirit problem, then the natural cause would be a baptism problem. Paul asks about their baptism, and he was right, they did have a baptism problem, they had only John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but they had not been baptized in Jesus' name.

Baptism in Jesus' name joins us to Jesus, and Jesus gives us the Spirit. So Paul baptized them in Jesus' name, and the Spirit came, just as Paul knew he would. How did we ever come to believe that baptism was just a sign to the world that we have faith in Christ?

Acts 22:16 In Acts 22, Paul is telling his own story of the Lord meeting him on the road to Damascus, the same story we read in Acts 9, when Ananias came to Paul and Paul was baptized after he could see again, but before he ate. Here Paul tells us what Ananias actually said to him about baptism: V16 *"And now, [Paul,] what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."*

When would Paul's sins be washed away? When he is baptized and calls on the Lord. Are being baptized and calling on the Lord separate events? Not in this line. Here those are two sides of the same event. Paul reports Ananias like that, and Paul does not think Ananias needs any help.

This is our story. This is my story. In my story these events are spread out over years. But this Scripture tells me that these three are one package: I've been baptized and my sins have been washed away and I have called on the Lord. In my life, and in your lives, these belong together.

In Lydia's story, she heard the message, and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the message, and she was baptized, and she showed the change by kindness to these preachers. That is my story, and yours, and the Scripture teaches us how to see our coming to the Lord.

Peter said, "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the Holy Spirit." That's the basic line, and that is the Scripture telling us how we got to be followers of the Lord. We all have different stories, but these stories in Acts show us how to understand our stories.

Baptism, along with faith and repentance, are how we respond to God when we hear the gospel. God on his part forgives our sins and gives us the Holy Spirit.

If there is anyone here who has not responded to the gospel, I want to do with you what Peter did: I plead with you, save yourself from this corrupt generation. Repent and be baptized in Jesus name for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the Holy Spirit. The message is just the same, and the offer is just as open.

The Bible does not tell us what to do with children who grow up in the church. We know, from Jesus himself more than any other, that the faith in God of children is just as important to God as adult faith. The stories in Acts are all first generation stories, and we do not know what happened to children who were born after the parents had become Christians.

But church from early days took 12 years old as the minimum age when people were ready to choose God for themselves, following the Jewish custom, and so we have adopted that in this church. If there is anyone here who wants to be baptized, come talk to me. Amen.

Appendix

John 3:5 *No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.* Commentaries argue back and forth on whether the “water” in this verse means “baptism,” but seen in the light of Acts, it is most naturally baptism in water. People were baptized in the name of Jesus, and they received the Holy Spirit, and that is a fair (not complete of course) summary of conversion in Acts. In John 1, John the Baptist mentions his water baptism and Jesus’ future Spirit baptism together (John 1:26,33). “Water” in paired with Spirit in 3:5 can hardly be anything else; it is our peculiar theology that steers us away from that.

Titus 3:5 *Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.* Again, I was taught that washing of renewal / regeneration was not baptism, but only a metaphorical reference to forgiveness of sins. Viewed after seeing what Acts taught us, however, we see Paul entirely in line with Acts. Peter said, “Be baptized in the name of Jesus, for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.” Paul repeats Peter in slightly different words. See Ananias in Acts 22:16 – *Be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*