# Baptism in Biblical Theology:

*A Typological, Covenantal, and Linguistic Examination*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the theological significance of baptism through the lenses of biblical typology, covenantal theology, linguistic analysis, and historical development across Christian traditions. Drawing upon the insights of Dr. Michael S. Heiser, it examines key problem passages such as 1 Peter 3:14-22, Acts 22:16, and Acts 2:38, as well as the relationship between baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2:11-12. The study critiques theological inconsistencies in various Christian creeds regarding baptism's role in salvation and provides a historical overview of baptismal beliefs among the early church fathers, Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Protestant Reformation movements, and modern evangelical traditions.

While the early church fathers widely affirmed baptism as necessary for salvation, later Christian traditions developed different theological interpretations. Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism maintain that baptism is sacramental and effectual, imparting grace and forgiveness. High Church Protestant traditions such as Lutheranism and Anglicanism hold to baptism as a means of grace while distinguishing it from absolute necessity. The Reformed tradition views baptism as a covenantal sign rather than an instrument of salvation. Meanwhile, Baptists and many evangelical groups reject sacramental baptism in favor of a symbolic or ordinance-based model that reflects faith already possessed.

Additionally, this study considers the theological implications of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43) as a potential counterexample to baptismal necessity, along with the Catholic concept of baptism of desire and baptism of blood. The paper also examines the linguistic debate over the Greek term baptizo, evaluating whether immersion, sprinkling, or pouring was the primary mode of baptism in the early church. Ultimately, this study argues that while baptism is a significant theological practice with deep biblical roots, it should not be viewed as the means of salvation but rather as a public declaration of faith, covenant membership, and spiritual warfare in alignment with the biblical worldview.

# I. INTRODUCTION

Baptism, as presented in the New Testament, is often linked to Old Testament typology, where water represents both judgment and salvation. The Apostle Peter explicitly makes this connection in *1 Peter 3:14-22*, linking baptism to the story of Noah. Similarly, the Apostle Paul connects baptism to the Red Sea crossing in *1 Corinthians 10:1-4*. These typological connections suggest that baptism is not merely a Christian innovation but rather part of a broader biblical pattern of divine deliverance through water.

**Noah's Flood as a Type of Baptism**

One of the most direct typological links between baptism and the Old Testament is found in *1 Peter 3:14-22*. Peter states:

"*Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"* (*1 Peter 3:21*, ESV).

Peter's statement follows his discussion of Noah, where he explains that just as Noah and his family were saved through water, so too are Christians saved through baptism. However, the phrase *"not as a removal of dirt from the body"* indicates that Peter does not view baptism as a mere physical cleansing but rather as a spiritual act of identifying with Christ's resurrection.

Scholars such as Michael Heiser argue that Peter's mention of Noah in the context of baptism is not arbitrary but tied to Second Temple Jewish thought, particularly the

traditions found in *1 Enoch*.[1] Here the flood is portrayed as divine judgment against the rebellious Watchers, fallen angels who corrupted humanity before the flood. Baptism, then, becomes more than just a sign of personal salvation—it is a cosmic declaration of allegiance to Christ against the rebellious spiritual forces.[2] Notably, *1 Enoch* 10:9 describes how the flood was sent to destroy the Nephilim, reinforcing the idea that baptism symbolizes not only personal salvation but also the destruction of the corrupted world and a rebirth into Christ's new creation.

Additionally, the phrase *"through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"* in *1 Peter 3:21* su4ggests that baptism is fundamentally about participation in Christ's victory over sin, death, and demonic powers. This aligns with Paul's teaching in *Romans 6:3-4*, where baptism symbolizes dying and rising with Christ.[3]

**The Red Sea Crossing and Baptism**

Paul also employs typology when discussing baptism in *1 Corinthians 10:1-4*:

*"For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea"* (*1 Corinthians 10:1-2*, ESV).

Here, Paul presents Israel's Red Sea crossing as a form of baptism. The Israelites, pursued by Pharaoh's army, were delivered through water, just as Christians are delivered

[1] Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 206–208.

[2] Michael S. Heiser, *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, the Watchers, and the Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 101–105.

[3] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 385.

from sin and death through baptism. This typology reinforces the idea that baptism is an act of divine deliverance rather than simply a ritual act.[4]

However, it is worth noting that Paul does not state that the Israelites were literally immersed in water. Instead, they passed through the sea while remaining dry. This challenges the argument that baptism must be performed by full immersion, as Paul's language suggests that the symbolic meaning of baptism is more important than its physical mode.[5]

Furthermore, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 provides an additional link between baptism and the Exodus motif. Heiser suggests that when Jesus speaks of being *"born of water and the Spirit"* (John 3:5), He is not referencing natural birth or water baptism, but rather Israel's passage through the Red Sea, which was their birth as God's covenant people.[6] Just as Israel was delivered from Egypt through water and then led by the Spirit (Exodus 14:21; Isaiah 63:11-14), believers must be reborn by the Spirit into the new covenant. This strengthens the case for baptism as a new Exodus, where followers of Christ pass through the waters to be reborn into the kingdom of God.

## II. BAPTISM AS A COSMIC DECLARATION OF SPIRITUAL ALLEGIANCE

Both Peter's flood analogy and Paul's Red Sea typology point to a broader biblical theme—baptism as a declaration of loyalty to Christ in the context of cosmic

[4] A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 225.

[5] G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 102-105.

[6] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 211–214.

spiritual warfare. In the ancient world, water often represented chaos, danger, and divine judgment. By passing through water, whether in Noah's flood or the Red Sea, God's people emerged on the other side under His rule and protection.

Baptism, in this framework, is not only about personal salvation but about renouncing allegiance to Satan and his kingdom while identifying with the kingdom of God. The early church recognized this cosmic battle, incorporating formal renunciations of Satan and his demons into baptismal rites. These practices stemmed from the understanding that demons originated from the spirits of the dead Nephilim (*1 Enoch* 15:8–12), making baptism a public declaration of defection from their influence.

**Baptism as Cosmic Reclamation and Political Allegiance**

Baptism is not just a theological debate over sacraments and symbols—it is a declaration of war. In *1 Peter 3:21*, Peter explicitly links baptism to Noah's flood, where rebellious spiritual beings were judged and imprisoned (*1 Enoch 6–16*). This means baptism is not simply a personal commitment to faith but a cosmic act of defiance against the spiritual rulers who once enslaved humanity (*Colossians 2:15*). Baptism marks an individual's transfer from the dominion of darkness into the Kingdom of God (*Colossians 1:13*), publicly renouncing the fallen sons of God who sought to rule the nations (*Deuteronomy 32:8-9*).

## III. PENTECOST AND THE RECLAMATION OF THE NATIONS

The theological significance of baptism becomes even clearer when connected to Pentecost. As Michael Heiser has pointed out, the Day of Pentecost was Christ's act of reclaiming the nations that had been disinherited at Babel. At Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), humanity's unity was fractured, and God *"disinherited"* the nations, allotting them to the

fallen sons of God (Deuteronomy 32:8–9, LXX; cf. Psalm 82). This foundational passage reveals the concept of *cosmic geography*[7]—the idea that the nations were placed under the rule of rebellious spiritual beings while Israel remained Yahweh's inheritance.

These nations came under the dominion of hostile divine rulers, resulting in a world entrenched in idolatry and spiritual deception (Daniel 10:13, 20). Pentecost was the reversal of that disinheritance, marking the beginning of God's plan to bring the lost nations, listed in the Table of Nations found in Genesis 10, back under His dominion through the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2:5–11). By sending the Holy Spirit, Christ reasserted His authority over the nations and began the process of reclaiming sacred space.[8] In a very real sense, baptism is an individual's *own* Pentecost—their entrance into the restored family of God.[9]

This understanding aligns with Paul's cosmic view of Christ's victory in Colossians 2:15, where Jesus *"disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."* Baptism is about both personal salvation and a public renunciation of the fallen elohim who once ruled over the nations and a declaration of allegiance to Christ, the rightful King.

**Baptism as Political Allegiance**

In the ancient world, baptism was not just a religious act—it was a political declaration. Early Christians were persecuted not only for believing in Jesus but also for declaring Him *Lord* instead of Caesar. Baptism signified a transfer of allegiance, from the

[7] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 113-120

[8] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 334.

[9] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 147.

kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of Christ (Philippians 3:20). This reality explains why the early church incorporated formal renunciations of Satan into baptismal rites; to be baptized was to publicly forsake all other allegiances and claim Jesus as the supreme King.[10]

This theme is also embedded in biblical imagery. Just as Israel passed through the Red Sea, breaking free from Pharaoh's dominion and becoming Yahweh's people (1 Corinthians 10:1–2), baptism marks a similar transition. Paul describes it as burial and resurrection with Christ (Romans 6:3–4), emphasizing that the baptized individual is no longer part of the old-world order but now lives under the reign of Christ. In this sense, baptism is a radical political act—it defies the spiritual and earthly rulers who once held power over the believer (Colossians 2:15).[11]

Pentecost was the turning point in Christ's reclamation of the nations (Acts 2), reversing the disinheritance of Babel (Genesis 11; Deuteronomy 32:8–9). Just as the Holy Spirit was poured out to empower the apostles to bring the gospel to all peoples, baptism is the believer's personal initiation into this cosmic reversal. Through baptism, the individual publicly identifies with Christ's victory at Pentecost, aligning themselves with His mission to reclaim and restore the nations under His rule.

The political implications of baptism were not lost on Rome. In the first few centuries, to undergo baptism was to risk exile, imprisonment, or even death, as it was seen as treason against the empire. Ramsay MacMullen notes that as Christianity spread, conversion and baptism *"were not merely spiritual acts but revolutionary ones,"*

[10] The Service of Holy Baptism, Orthodox Church in America, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.oca.org.

[11] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 334.

challenging Rome's imperial cult.[12] Even today, in regions hostile to Christianity, baptism remains a defining moment that signals one's ultimate allegiance to Christ above all other authorities.

**Baptism as a Reenactment of Christ's Victory Over the Powers**

Baptism is more than an act of personal faith—it is an act of war. Peter directly ties baptism to Christ's victory over the rebellious spiritual forces in 1 Peter 3:19–22. After His crucifixion, Jesus descended into the underworld—not only to offer salvation to the dead, but to proclaim His triumph over the fallen Watchers who had been imprisoned since the flood in Tartarus (Genesis 6:1–4; 1 Enoch 6–16).[13] The early church saw baptism as a continuation of that declaration.

When a believer enters the baptismal waters, they reenact Christ's own journey—His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4). Paul makes this explicit when he writes:

> *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore 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."*

But baptism is not only a personal identification with Christ—it is a supernatural proclamation. Just as Jesus declared judgment upon the fallen powers, baptism serves as a decisive statement to the unseen realm, signifying their defeat. The early church regarded baptism as an act of defiance against the spiritual rulers of this world—an

[12] Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100–400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 105.

[13] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 330–34.

unequivocal renunciation of their dominion and a declaration of allegiance to Christ's sovereign rule.

This understanding aligns with biblical language about Christ's victory. Colossians 2:15 states that Jesus *"disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them."* The imagery here is drawn from a Roman triumph, where a defeated enemy was publicly paraded as a sign of complete conquest. Baptism participates in this triumph, demonstrating that the believer is no longer under the rule of sin, death, or the rebellious spiritual forces.[14]

**Baptism as a Loyalty Oath and Spiritual Allegiance**

Throughout history, oaths of loyalty signified allegiance to a ruler, and baptism functions in the same way—marking a believer's formal pledge of fidelity to Christ. The early church recognized this, which is why early baptismal rites included renunciations of Satan and his dominion. Hippolytus of Rome (c. 215 AD) records that new believers were asked, *"Do you renounce Satan, and all his works, and all his pomps?"* before being baptized.[15] The Orthodox Church emphasizing that baptism is more than a private decision—it is a defection from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13). The Orthodox Church continues this tradition, by asking, *"Do you renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride?"*[16]

[14] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 146–47.

[15] Hippolytus of Rome, *Apostolic Tradition* 21.8, trans. Burton Scott Easton (*The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934], 45).

[16] *The Service of Holy Baptism*, https://www.oca.org.

This is not just a human declaration; it is a cosmic proclamation. In 1 Peter 3:19–22, Peter links baptism to Christ's proclamation of victory over the *"spirits in prison,"* the fallen Watchers of Genesis 6. Just as Enoch descended to announce judgment to these imprisoned spirits in *1 Enoch*, Christ did the same after His crucifixion, declaring their ultimate defeat.[17] Baptism mirrors this moment, serving as a visible oath of allegiance to Christ's kingdom while simultaneously declaring the defeat of the fallen powers.

Baptism brands the believer in the spiritual realm. Paul describes believers as being *"sealed"* by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13), a mark of divine ownership. In Revelation, God's people are sealed with His mark, while those in rebellion bear the mark of the Beast (Revelation 7:3; 13:16). In the ancient world, branding was a sign of authority—slaves bore the mark of their masters, and soldiers swore loyalty to their commanders. Baptism functions, similarly, but in the unseen realm.[18] It visibly declares, *I belong to Christ. I am no longer under the rule of the kingdom of darkness.*

Ancient cultures reinforced this understanding through physical branding and seals of ownership. In the Greco-Roman world, slaves bore the marks of their masters, and soldiers swore loyalty oaths to their commanders.[19] Baptism functioned in a similar manner but in the unseen realm, visibly marking the baptized as citizens of Christ's Kingdom. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 6:3–4, where baptism is described as union

[17] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 330–34.

[18] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 146–47.

[19] MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100–400*, 105.

with Christ in His death and resurrection—an act that not only signifies spiritual rebirth but also a declaration of victory over the spiritual forces that once held dominion.[20]

Michael Heiser has argued that baptism mirrors Christ's victory over the fallen powers and functions as a visible proclamation to the supernatural realm.[21] Just as Jesus descended into the underworld to announce judgment upon the imprisoned spirits (1 Peter 3:19–22), the baptized believer proclaims through baptism that they have been transferred from the dominion of darkness into the Kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13). This is why early baptismal rites included renunciations of Satan.

Thus, baptism serves not only as an entrance into the covenant community but as a supernatural enlistment into the Kingdom of God. It is an act of spiritual warfare, branding the believer with the mark of Christ and proclaiming before both heaven and earth that they now belong to the risen King.

**Conclusion**

Baptism is therefore both a covenant sign and a cosmic declaration. While it connects believers to the New Covenant, it also functions as an initiation into God's divine family and an act of spiritual warfare against the enemies of the Kingdom. Many theologians have treated baptism as either a sacramental means of grace or a symbolic ordinance, but through the lens of the *Divine Council Worldview* (DCW), Baptism is a direct challenge to the rulers and authorities who once held sway over the nations (*Ephesians 6:12*).

[20] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 146–47.

[21] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 330–34.

## IV. THE *DIVINE COUNCIL WORLDVIEW* (DWC): A BIBLICAL AND APOLOGETIC DEFENSE

### The New Testament's Alignment with the Divine Council Worldview

The *Divine Council Worldview* (DCW), which understands the biblical cosmos as consisting of Yahweh ruling over both earthly and heavenly beings, is not a fringe theological position but a consistent biblical framework that stretches from Genesis to Revelation. The New Testament (NT) authors do not present a new cosmology but operate within the supernatural framework already established in the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish literature.[22]

The NT affirms that the world is currently under the dominion of hostile spiritual powers, which Christ came to overthrow (Colossians 2:15, 1 John 3:8). These powers were originally allotted rulership over the nations (Deuteronomy 32:8–9, LXX),[23] but through Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, they were decisively defeated, and their authority was stripped away (Ephesians 1:20–21). The DCW not only provides the best biblical explanation for these concepts but also aligns with the NT authors' emphasis on cosmic warfare, baptism, and the reclaiming of the nations.[24]

### The Divine Council in the Old Testament and New Testament

The concept of the Divine Council is not extrabiblical speculation, as some critics claim, but is deeply embedded in both Old and New Testament theology. The term

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[22] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 25–29.

[23] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 115–120.

[24] Michael S. Heiser, *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God's Heavenly Host* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 87–94.

*"Divine Council"* comes directly from Psalm 82, where Elohim (God) presides over other elohim (spiritual beings) and passes judgment on them for their corruption:

*"God has taken his place in the divine council;*

*in the midst of the gods he holds judgment."* (Psalm 82:1, ESV)

These are not mere idols or human rulers (as some later theologians suggested), because the same beings are condemned to die *"like men"* (Psalm 82:7), indicating that they were not human to begin with.

The New Testament authors assume this framework, describing spiritual rulers, authorities, thrones, dominions, and cosmic powers (Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 1:16) as real, active entities. Paul does not redefine these supernatural forces in Greco-Roman philosophical terms but instead maintains the STJ view that these beings are rebellious spiritual authorities ruling over the nations.

**The Deuteronomy 32:8–9 Framework: Biblical Basis for Divine Beings Ruling the Nations**

One of the clearest biblical affirmations of the *Divine Council Worldview* is Deuteronomy 32:8–9 (LXX version),[25] which states:

*"When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when He divided mankind, He fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is His people, Jacob His allotted heritage."*[26]

[25] John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 133–140.

[26] Deuteronomy 32:8–9 (LXX)

The *"sons of God"* (bene elohim) in this passage are divine beings, not humans, as supported by the Dead Sea Scrolls and ancient Jewish literature.[27] This passage teaches that at Babel (Genesis 11), Yahweh disinherited the nations and assigned them to lesser spiritual beings—many of whom became corrupt and were later condemned in Psalm 82. This is why the NT authors present Jesus' mission as reclaiming the nations from these fallen powers. [28]

- Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) explicitly states *that "all authority in heaven and on earth"* has been given to Him, implying that the previous rulers—spiritual or otherwise—have been dethroned.[29]
- Paul's theology in Colossians 2:15 describes Jesus as having disarmed the rulers and authorities, triumphing over them—a direct challenge to the authority of the fallen divine council members.
- Pentecost (Acts 2) marks the first step in the reclamation of the nations, reversing the Babel event and inviting all people back under Yahweh's dominion.[30]

This cohesive theological narrative makes sense only within the DCW framework.

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[27] J. J. M. Roberts, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 65–71.

[28] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 153–160.

[29] Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 102–107.

[30] D. Gene Williams Jr., *Spiritual Gifts and the Primordial Language: A Study of Continuation, Cessation, and Early Church Perspectives*, accessed March 2025, https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr; https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html.

**The New Testaments' Conflict with Later Greek and Latin Theology**

While the NT maintains the Second Temple Jewish supernatural worldview, later Greek and Latin theologians progressively reinterpreted these concepts:

- **The Shift from Divine Council to Abstract Hierarchies**

  The early church fathers, influenced by Greek philosophy, gradually replaced the biblical concept of the Divine Council with a rigid hierarchy of angels and demons. Augustine (354–430 AD), for example, rejected the idea that Psalm 82 referred to actual divine beings under judgment. Instead, he reinterpreted the "gods" (elohim) as human rulers, marking a significant departure from the Jewish and New Testament understanding. In contrast, the Second Temple Jewish worldview saw these "gods" as rebellious supernatural beings whom God condemned—a view reflected in the New Testament's treatment of spiritual powers (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8:5–6; Ephesians 6:12.[31]

- **The Demythologization of Baptism**

  Although, Second Temple Jewish thought associated baptism with fidelity, later Latin theology reduced baptism to a sacramental cleansing of original sin, stripping it of its cosmic and spiritual warfare significance. The early church saw baptism as an act of defection from the kingdom of darkness (Colossians 1:13), whereas later theological developments emphasized its role in washing away inherited guilt. [32]

- **The Loss of the Nephilim-Demon Connection**

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[31] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 10.6.

[32] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 173–180.

The New Testament affirms the STJ belief that demons are the disembodied spirits of the Nephilim (cf. 1 Enoch 15:8–12; Matthew 12:43). However, Greek and Latin theologians lost this connection, replacing it with a view of demons as just tempters of the soul rather than territorial spiritual rulers. This theological shift weakened the church's understanding of spiritual warfare, diminishing the cosmic implications of Christ's mission as a direct confrontation with the hostile spiritual rulers over the nations (Colossians 2:15).[33]

**Augustine: The Theologian Who Overcorrected?**

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) is one of the most influential figures in Christian theology, shaping doctrines on grace, sin, and free will. However, his early life—particularly his time with the Manichaeans, a Gnostic sect—deeply influenced his later theological developments. Before converting to Christianity, Augustine spent nearly a decade as a follower of Manichaean dualism, which taught that the material world was inherently evil and that salvation came through secret knowledge (gnosis).[34]

When Augustine finally rejected Manichaeanism, his response was not just a correction but an overcorrection, leading to theological positions that dramatically shaped Western Christianity..

**1. Augustine's Shift on Free Will and Predestination**

The Manichaeans denied human free will, teaching that people were trapped in a cosmic struggle between good and evil forces beyond their control. Initially,

[33] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.6.1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 494.

[34] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 38–45.

Augustine defended free will, but over time—especially in his debates with Pelagius—he developed a rigid doctrine of predestination, one that greatly reduced human agency in salvation. This shift laid the foundation for later Reformed theology, including Calvinism's emphasis on total depravity and divine election.

2. **Augustine's Rejection of Supernaturalism and the *Divine Council Worldview***

Manichaeism was deeply mystical and emphasized supernatural revelation. Augustine, in his reaction against this, moved toward a more rationalized and systematic theology. This rejection of mystical spiritualism contributed to the Western church's diminished emphasis on the supernatural worldview, including the Divine Council paradigm that was prominent in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity.[35]

3. **Augustine's Influence on the Demythologization of Christian Theology**

Augustine's influence led to a more philosophical and allegorical interpretation of spiritual realities, reinforcing the Greek-influenced tendency to downplay the supernatural conflict described in Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 2:15, and 1 Peter 3:19–22. This shift helped shape a Western Christianity that often viewed spiritual warfare, cosmic geography, and divine conflict as metaphorical rather than real.

**Conclusion: The Lasting Impact of Augustine's Overcorrection**

Augustine's theological brilliance is undeniable, but his reactions to Gnosticism were not mere refinements—they were countermeasures shaped by his personal history.

[35] Charles T. Mathewes, *Augustine on Evil and Original Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 78–82.

As a result, Christian theology, particularly in the West, absorbed a version of doctrine that may have overcorrected in areas like:

- Spiritual warfare – reducing it to internal struggles rather than cosmic conflicts
- Free will and predestination – shifting from a biblical balance toward rigid determinism
- The supernatural worldview – suppressing the Divine Council theology in favor of philosophical abstraction

Recognizing this historical context allows for a more nuanced evaluation of Augustine's legacy, offering a pathway for rediscovering the supernatural worldview of the biblical authors—a worldview that was central to Jesus, Paul, and the early church but was later reshaped by Greek and Latin thought.

## V. BAPTISM, CIRCUMCISION, AND COVENANT MEMBERSHIP

The relationship between baptism and circumcision has been a central point of discussion in Christian theology, particularly within Reformed and covenantal traditions. The Apostle Paul explicitly links the two in *Colossians 2:11-12*, where he describes baptism as a kind of New Covenant circumcision. Understanding this connection is crucial for evaluating different Christian views on whether baptism replaces circumcision as a covenantal sign, whether it should be applied to infants, and whether it is necessary for salvation.

### Colossians 2:11-12: Paul's Link Between Baptism and Circumcision

*Paul writes in Colossians 2:11-12:*

*"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with*

*him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead"* (ESV).

Here, Paul describes baptism as a spiritual circumcision—one not performed with human hands but accomplished through Christ. Unlike physical circumcision, which was a sign of inclusion in the Old Covenant community of Israel, baptism is linked to union with Christ in His death and resurrection.

This passage is often cited by Reformed theologians to support paedobaptism (infant baptism), arguing that just as circumcision was applied to infants in the Old Testament, baptism should be applied to children of believers in the New Testament. However, a closer examination of Paul's argument suggests that faith is the necessary component in baptism, as he explicitly states that those baptized are *"raised with him through faith."* This presents a challenge to paedobaptist theology, as infants cannot exercise faith in the same way believers do.[36]

**Infant Baptism vs. Believer's Baptism**

The debate over infant baptism versus believer's baptism centers on the covenantal continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The key arguments for each view are as follows:

- **Paedobaptism (Infant Baptism):**

  Just as circumcision was given to infants under the Old Covenant, baptism should be applied to infants under the New Covenant. Baptism marks inclusion in the

[36] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 352-357.

visible covenant community, though it does not necessarily guarantee salvation. Key defenders: Augustine, John Calvin, and modern Reformed theologians.[37]

- **Credobaptism (Believer's Baptism):**

  Baptism should only be administered to those who personally profess faith in Christ. While circumcision was based on physical descent, baptism is based on spiritual regeneration. Key defenders: Early Anabaptists, Baptists, and modern evangelical theologians.[38]

This theological debate reflects broader differences in how various traditions interpret the nature of the New Covenant. Some argue for a continuity between the covenants (Reformed paedobaptism), while others emphasize the discontinuity, arguing that the New Covenant requires a personal faith commitment (credobaptism).

**Theological Implications of Baptism as a Covenant Sign**

The primary theological issue at stake is whether baptism, like circumcision, conveys a spiritual reality or simply marks one's inclusion in a community. The Old Testament never states that circumcision guaranteed salvation; rather, it was a sign of belonging to Israel. Likewise, if baptism is only a covenantal marker, then it does not necessarily save but rather identifies one with the people of God.

However, if baptism is more than a covenantal sign, then it plays a role in salvation itself, as some traditions hold. This question will be explored in greater depth in the next section, which addresses baptism and salvation in key New Testament passages.

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[37] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), IV.xvii.1-5.

[38] Stanley K. Fowler, *Rethinking Baptism: Scripture, Tradition, and Baptist Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 112-118.

While baptism carries a covenantal function akin to circumcision, it does not replace it but expands and surpasses it. Unlike circumcision, baptism is not merely an external mark—it is an act of participation in Christ's death and resurrection. It is not just a sign of the New Covenant but a spiritual act of allegiance, marking one's transition from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of God.

## VI. BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD (1 CORINTHIANS 15:29) AND ITS THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

One of the most debated passages concerning baptism is 1 Corinthians 15:29, where Paul states:

> *"Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?"* (ESV)

This passage has led to over 40 competing interpretations, with some theologians arguing that it supports posthumous baptism for salvific purposes, while others view it as a misunderstood or obscure practice of the Corinthian church.[39] A closer examination, however, suggests that this verse does not support the idea of vicarious baptism for the dead, but rather a practice of being baptized in honor of deceased Christian witnesses.

### Possible Interpretations of Baptism for the Dead

Scholars have historically wrestled with the meaning of this verse, raising several key questions:

- Is the baptism mentioned here literal water baptism, or is it metaphorical?

[39] James E. Patrick, "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles: Baptized for the Dead in 1 Corinthians 15:29," *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 71-85.

- Who are *"the dead"* being referenced—Christian martyrs, deceased relatives, or non-believers?
- Does Paul approve of this practice, or is he purely citing it rhetorically?

The Catholic and Orthodox traditions often interpret this passage in line with their broader sacramental theology, arguing that it implies some form of posthumous spiritual benefit, though not necessarily full salvific efficacy.[40] The Mormon Church (Latter-day Saints) takes this even further, using the verse to justify their doctrine of baptism by proxy for deceased ancestors.[41]

However, a careful textual and contextual analysis suggests that the best reading of the passage is honorific baptism, meaning that believers in Corinth were baptized as an act of devotion to deceased Christian witnesses—especially the martyrs and apostles who had testified to Christ's resurrection.[42]

**Baptism as an Act of Honor for Christian Martyrs and Apostles**

The key to understanding Paul's argument lies in his discussion of the 500 witnesses to Christ's resurrection earlier in the same chapter:

*"Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles."* (1 Cor 15:6-7, ESV)

Paul states that some of these 500 witnesses had already died by the time he wrote 1 Corinthians. Many scholars argue that these were faithful Christian witnesses who had

[40] Bernard Foschini, "Baptism for the Dead (1 Cor 15:29): An Exegetical Historical Dissertation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1950): 260-275.

[41] Bennett, *Mormons and Their Baptism for the Dead*, 45-57.

[42] Patrick, "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles," 78-80.

proclaimed the resurrection and possibly faced martyrdom.[43] Given the high cost of publicly affirming Jesus' resurrection in a hostile Roman world, it is likely that some of these individuals were executed for their testimony.

New Testament scholar James Patrick argues that the practice Paul references was a ritual act of honor, where new believers were baptized in acknowledgment of the testimony of these now-deceased apostles and martyrs.[44] Rather than a ritual of vicarious salvation, it was an act of identification with those who had died for the faith.

**Why This Interpretation Fits the Context**

- **The Literary Structure of 1 Corinthians 15**

  This passage is embedded in Paul's defense of the resurrection. If there is no resurrection, it would make no sense to honor the dead by baptism.[45]

- **The Use of the Greek Preposition ὑπέρ (*hyper*)**

  The phrase *baptized on behalf of the dead* (ὑπὲρ τῶν νεκρῶν) can mean *"for the sake of" or "in honor of"* the dead, rather than "*as a substitute for"* the dead.[46] Similar Greek constructions elsewhere in the New Testament often denote honor rather than vicarious substitution.[47]

- **Paul's Silence on Any Posthumous Salvific Function**

  Paul nowhere endorses the idea of baptism bringing salvation to the dead.

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[43] Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 155-158.

[44] Patrick, "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles," 79.

[45] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 385.

[46] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 383.

[47] Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 225.

The lack of rebuke suggests the practice itself was not problematic but was simply being misused in an argument denying the resurrection.[48]

**Conclusion: Does This Passage Support Baptismal Regeneration?**

This passage does not support the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation, nor does it validate any concept of posthumous redemption through vicarious rites. Instead, it shows that early Christian converts identified with the faith of deceased witnesses and martyrs by receiving baptism as an act of public allegiance to Christ and in honor of those who had gone before them.

Paul's rhetorical point remains: If the resurrection is not real, why would believers go to such lengths to be baptized in honor of those who had died professing it? The practice only makes sense if the resurrection is true. Thus, rather than being an obscure theological footnote, this passage actually reinforces Paul's broader resurrection theology.

## VII. BAPTISM AND SALVATION: EXAMINING PROBLEM PASSAGES

One of the most debated aspects of baptism is its relationship to salvation. While some traditions argue that baptism is necessary for salvation (*baptismal regeneration*), others maintain that it is an outward sign of an inward faith, with no intrinsic power to save. Several key passages in the New Testament appear to link baptism to the forgiveness of sins, leading to differing interpretations among Christian traditions.

[48] Patrick, "Living Rewards for Dead Apostles," 81-83.

This section will analyze three major problem passages—*Acts 22:16*, *Acts 2:38*, and *1 Peter 3:21*—to determine whether baptism is essential for salvation or if it functions as a symbolic affirmation of faith rather than a causative act of regeneration.

**Acts 22:16: Does Baptism *"Wash Away"* Sins?**

In *Acts 22:16*, Ananias commands Paul (then Saul) to be baptized, saying:

> *"And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."* (ESV)

At first glance, this passage appears to suggest that baptism washes away sins, reinforcing a sacramental understanding of baptismal regeneration. However, a closer look at the Greek grammar reveals an alternative reading.

The phrase *"wash away your sins"* is connected to the verb *"calling on his name"*, which is an aorist participle. According to Greek grammar rules, aorist participles often indicate an action that precedes the main verb.[49] This means the structure of the sentence could be translated as:

> *"Having called on his name, be baptized and wash away your sins."*

This reading aligns with Paul's theology elsewhere in the New Testament, where calling on the name of the Lord (faith) is the essential requirement for salvation (*Romans 10:13*). Thus, while baptism is closely linked to the forgiveness of sins, this passage does not definitively teach that baptism itself causes regeneration.

**Acts 2:38: Baptism *for* the Forgiveness of Sins?**

Another key passage in the baptismal debate is *Acts 2:38*:

[49] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 569-572.

*"And Peter said to them, '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.'"* (ESV)

The phrase *"for the forgiveness of your sins"* hinges on the Greek preposition *eis* (εἰς), which has multiple possible meanings. While *eis* can mean *"for the purpose of", it can also mean "because of" or "in reference to".*[50]

If *eis* is understood as *"for the purpose of"*, the passage supports baptismal regeneration—baptism is a requirement for receiving forgiveness. However, if *eis* is translated as *"because of", then baptism is performed as a response to sins already forgiven. This would align with passages such as Luke 5:13-14, where Jesus tells a healed man to offer a sacrifice "for"* (*eis*) his cleansing—not to be cleansed, but because he had already been healed.

Given that Peter elsewhere emphasizes faith as the means of salvation (*Acts 10:43*), the latter interpretation appears more consistent with Luke's theology in Acts.

**1 Peter 3:21*: "Baptism Now Saves You"*?**

Perhaps the most explicit passage on baptism and salvation is *1 Peter 3:21*:

*"Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."* (ESV)

Peter's statement *"baptism... now saves you"* seems to strongly support baptismal regeneration. However, Peter immediately qualifies his statement by clarifying that baptism is not a mere external washing but rather an *"appeal to God for a good*

[50] Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 35-37.

*conscience."* This suggests that the salvific aspect of baptism lies in its connection to faith, rather than the act itself. The phrase *"appeal to God for a good conscience"* is better understood as a declaration of faith in Christ, similar to the public confession mentioned in *Romans 10:9-10*.[51] Moreover, Peter links baptism to Christ's resurrection, reinforcing the idea that baptism's saving power comes from faith in Christ's finished work rather than the ritual itself.

**The Thief on the Cross and Salvation Without Baptism"**

One of the strongest challenges to the necessity of baptism for salvation comes from Jesus' words to the thief on the cross (*Luke 23:39-43*). The repentant thief, crucified alongside Jesus, made a profession of faith, and Jesus responded:

*"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The thief was never baptized, yet Jesus assured him of his salvation. This raises an essential theological question: If baptism is an absolute requirement for salvation, how could the thief be saved without it?

**Counterargument: *"The Thief Was Under the Old Covenant"***

Some traditions, particularly Catholic and Orthodox theologians, argue that the thief's salvation was an exception because he lived before Pentecost, when Christian baptism had not yet been instituted. However, this objection does not hold for three reasons:

[51] Douglas J. Moo, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 145-148.

**A** **The Basis of Salvation Has Always Been Faith.**

The New Testament is clear that salvation is by faith apart from works (Ephesians 2:8-9). If baptism were always necessary, Jesus should have said, *"You would be with me in paradise if you were baptized."* Instead, His response affirms that faith in Him alone is sufficient.

**B** **Jesus Had Already Taught the Priority of Faith Over Rituals.**

In Luke 7:50, Jesus tells the sinful woman, *"Your faith has saved you."* In John 3:16, belief—not baptism—is the stated condition for eternal life.

**C** **The Thief's Salvation Prefigures All Who Are Unable to Be Baptized.**

If baptism were an absolute requirement, then those who die before baptism (deathbed conversions, persecuted believers, or those in remote areas without access to water) would be excluded from salvation. This contradicts the doctrine of God's justice and mercy, which recognizes that faith is what justifies.

**Final Reflection:** The thief on the cross serves as a paradigmatic example of how salvation is by faith alone, not by ritual performance. While baptism is a commanded act of obedience, it is not the determining factor in salvation—rather, it is the expression of a faith that has already justified.

**Summary: Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?**

The passages examined above demonstrate that while baptism is closely associated with salvation, it is not presented as a condition for salvation in and of itself. Instead:

- *Acts 22:16* suggests that faith (*calling on the name of the Lord*) precedes baptism.

- *Acts 2:38* hinges on the meaning of *eis*, which can indicate that baptism follows the forgiveness of sins rather than causes it.
- *1 Peter 3:21* emphasizes that baptism is not a mere washing but an appeal to God, aligning it with faith rather than a ritual requirement.

While many early church fathers and sacramental traditions interpret these passages as teaching baptismal regeneration, the New Testament as a whole consistently affirms that salvation comes by grace through faith (*Ephesians 2:8-9*), with baptism serving as the visible sign of that inward reality.

## VIII. HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BAPTISM AND SALVATION

The debate over whether baptism is necessary for salvation is not a modern Protestant-Catholic divide but one that has been discussed throughout church history. The early church fathers widely affirmed some form of *baptismal regeneration*, though nuances varied. Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions continue to uphold baptism as a sacrament necessary for salvation, while Protestant views range from sacramental (Lutheran, Anglican) to covenantal (Reformed) to symbolic (Baptist, evangelical).

This section will provide a concise survey of baptismal theology across these major traditions, followed by an analysis of the thief on the cross as a counterexample to the necessity of baptism.

### Early Church Fathers on Baptism

The early church overwhelmingly viewed baptism as salvific, associating it with the remission of sins and entrance into the Church. However, the understanding of baptismal necessity was sometimes nuanced:

- **Didache (c. late 1st – early 2nd century):** Baptism was essential for Christian initiation and should be performed in flowing water in the name of the Trinity.[52]
- **Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 AD):** Baptism results in regeneration and the forgiveness of sins, linking it to *John 3:5 ("born of water and the Spirit")*.[53]
- **Irenaeus (c. 130–202 AD):** Argued that baptism was necessary for rebirth into Christ, making it a replacement for circumcision.[54]
- **Tertullian (c. 155–220 AD):** Defended infant baptism but warned against delaying post-baptismal repentance, emphasizing that baptism brings spiritual cleansing.[55]
- **Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258 AD):** Affirmed that baptism was necessary for salvation, rejecting the validity of baptism performed by schismatics.[56]
- **Augustine (354–430 AD):** Strongly defended baptismal regeneration, teaching that unbaptized infants would be excluded from heaven due to original sin.[57]

While most early fathers affirmed baptismal regeneration, exceptions existed. Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397 AD), for example, acknowledged that martyrs could be saved through *baptism of blood* (martyrdom without water baptism). This idea laid the

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[52] *The Didache*, trans. Aaron Milavec (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 7.

[53] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 183.

[54] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 526.

[55] Tertullian, *On Baptism*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 669.

[56] Cyprian, *Epistle 72*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, 395-396.

[57] Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and on the Baptism of Infants*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, 27.

foundation for later Catholic doctrines of *baptism of desire* and *baptism of blood*, allowing for salvation outside formal water baptism.

**Baptism in Major Christian Traditions**

- **Eastern Orthodox**

  Baptism is a sacrament that regenerates, imparts the Holy Spirit, and unites believers to Christ. Infants are baptized and immediately receive *chrismation* (confirmation) and the Eucharist. Emphasizes *mystery* over legalistic necessity—God can act outside sacraments.

- **Roman Catholicism**

  Baptism washes away original sin and is necessary for salvation (*ex opere operato— "by the work performed").* Recognizes *baptism of desire* (explicit or implicit longing for baptism) and *baptism of blood* (martyrdom) as exceptions. Unbaptized infants are entrusted to God's mercy (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1261).

- **Lutheran & Anglican (High Church Protestantism)**

  Baptism is a means of grace that imparts regeneration but must be accompanied by faith. **Luther:** Baptism saves but does not work apart from faith.[58]

  A**nglicanism (39 Articles):** Baptism is *"a sign of regeneration or new birth."*

[58] Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 438.

- **Reformed & Presbyterian (Covenantal Tradition)**

  Baptism replaces circumcision as a covenant sign but does not cause regeneration. Infants of believers are baptized as part of the visible Church. John Calvin: Baptism is a means of grace but not absolutely necessary for salvation.[59]

- **Evangelical & Baptist Traditions**

  Baptism is an ordinance, not a sacrament—purely symbolic of faith already possessed. Baptism follows a profession of faith and does not contribute to salvation. Key defenders: Early Anabaptists, Baptists, and modern evangelical theologians.[60]

**The Thief on the Cross: A Counterexample?**

A critical challenge to baptismal necessity comes from *Luke 23:39-43*, where Jesus tells the repentant thief on the cross:

> *"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."* (ESV)

The thief was not baptized, yet he received salvation directly from Christ. This passage is often cited by Protestants to demonstrate that baptism is not required for salvation.

**Interpretations of the Thief on the Cross**

- **Protestant View:** Faith alone is what saves. If baptism were necessary, Jesus would have indicated this to the thief.
- **Catholic and Orthodox View:** The thief experienced *baptism of desire*—his repentance and faith acted as a substitute for water baptism.

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[59] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xv.1.

[60] Stanley K. Fowler, *Rethinking Baptism: Scripture, Tradition, and Baptist Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 150.

- **Sacramental Protestant View:** The thief is an exception, not a normative case; God can save apart from baptism in extraordinary circumstances.

While the thief on the cross presents a strong challenge to absolute baptismal necessity, sacramental traditions argue that he is an exception, not the rule. Nonetheless, his case reinforces the primary role of faith in salvation.

**Summary: What Does Church History Teach?**

The early church affirmed baptism as a means of grace, often essential for salvation. Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism maintain baptismal regeneration, with limited exceptions (*baptism of desire, baptism of blood*). Lutherans and Anglicans hold a sacramental but faith-dependent view. Reformed traditions emphasize baptism as a covenantal sign, not a saving act. Evangelical traditions reject baptismal regeneration entirely. The thief on the cross suggests that faith, not ritual, is the ultimate basis for salvation. Thus, historical theology supports both a strong connection between baptism and salvation while also allowing for exceptions and theological flexibility.

## IX. THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS ON BAPTISM: WATER, SPIRIT, AND REBIRTH

The early church fathers universally interpreted *water* in John 3:5 as referring to baptism, rather than natural birth or cosmic chaos. Their writings emphasize baptism as the means of spiritual rebirth and entrance into the Kingdom of God. This perspective was deeply rooted in their theological understanding of salvation, creation, and divine restoration.

**Baptism as the Primary Meaning of *"Born of Water"***

From the earliest Christian writings, baptism was seen as the fulfillment of Jesus' words in John 3:5:

*"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."*

Early church fathers such as Justin Martyr (100–165 AD), Irenaeus (c. 130–202 AD), Tertullian (c. 160–225 AD), and Augustine (354–430 AD) consistently interpreted *water* in this passage as referring to baptism:

- **Justin Martyr** explicitly connects John 3:5 to Christian baptism, describing it as a moment of regeneration:

  *"As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated."*[61]

- **Tertullian**, in *On Baptism* (12), strongly affirms that *water* in John 3:5 refers to the sacrament of baptism:

  *"'Unless a man be born of water and spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of God'... This is the reason why the baptismal rite is conferred in water."*[62]

- **Augustine** argues that *water* in John 3:5 cannot refer to physical birth, but rather to the necessity of baptism:

  *"It is not the water that cleanses, but the Spirit that works through the water."*[63]

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[61] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61.

[62] Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 12.

[63] Augustine, *Tractates on John*, 15.4.

Thus, for the early church, baptism was not an optional ritual but a requirement for entrance into the Kingdom of God.

**Rejecting the Idea of Natural Birth**

A common modern interpretation suggests that *born of water* refers to natural birth (e.g., amniotic fluid), but this was not the view of the early church. Augustine, in particular, refuted this idea, stating that if *water* referred to physical birth, then every person would already be *born of water*, making Jesus' statement meaningless.[64]

**Baptism and the Waters of Creation**

Although the early church fathers did not interpret *water* in John 3:5 as referring to chaotic waters, they did draw connections between baptism and the waters of creation, the flood of Noah, and the Red Sea crossing:

- **Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386 AD)** connected baptism to Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit hovers over the waters:

  *"The Spirit moved over the waters of the first creation, and the Spirit moves over the waters of the second creation in baptism."*[65]

- **Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397 AD)** saw baptism as prefigured in Noah's Flood and the crossing of the Red Sea. He taught that water in these biblical events symbolized both divine judgment and salvation, just as baptism does in the New Covenant.[66]

[64] Augustine, *Tractates on John*, 15.5.

[65] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 3.5.

[66] Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries*, 3.14.

These connections reinforce that baptism is not only a means of individual salvation but also part of God's broader redemptive plan throughout history.

### Implications for Baptism as Spiritual Warfare

Though the early church fathers did not explicitly interpret *water* in John 3:5 as referring to *chaotic cosmic waters*, their strong emphasis on baptism as a renunciation of Satan and his rule aligns with the Divine Council perspective. Early baptismal rites often included formal denunciations of Satan, reinforcing the idea that baptism was seen as an act of spiritual warfare. Early Christian baptismal creeds required converts to renounce Satan and his angels before baptism.[67] Michael Heiser has pointed out that baptism is a declaration of allegiance to Christ and a defiance of the fallen sons of God who once ruled the nations (Deuteronomy 32:8–9, Psalm 82).[68] In this sense, baptism marks a believer's entrance into the Kingdom of God and simultaneously announces to the spiritual realm that the baptized individual is no longer under the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13).

## X. THE MODE OF BAPTISM: IMMERSION, POURING, OR SPRINKLING?

One of the most contentious issues regarding baptism is its mode—whether it must be performed by full immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. Different Christian traditions have adopted different practices, often citing biblical and historical precedent. While Baptists and many evangelicals insist that immersion is the only valid mode, Catholics, Orthodox, and many Protestant denominations recognize pouring (affusion)

[67] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 385.

[68] Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 206–214

and sprinkling (aspersion) as legitimate alternatives. This section examines the linguistic, biblical, and historical evidence concerning the proper mode of baptism.

**The Meaning of *Baptizo* in Greek**

The Greek word *baptizo* (*βαπτίζω*) is central to the debate. It is often claimed that *baptizo* means exclusively *"to immerse,"* thus necessitating full-body immersion for baptism. However, a broader linguistic analysis reveals that the term has a range of meanings, including *"dip," "plunge," "wash,"* and *"overwhelm".*[69]

**Uses of *Baptizo* in Ancient Greek Literature**

- **Immersion:** Used in contexts of sinking or submerging (e.g., *Josephus* describes a drowning soldier as *baptized* into the sea).[70]
- **Pouring or Sprinkling:** Used for **ritual washings** that did not involve full immersion, such as Jewish purification rites (*Mark 7:4*).[71]
- **Metaphorical Uses:** Used to describe being overwhelmed or engulfed (e.g., *Luke 12:50*, where Jesus speaks of being *"baptized"* into suffering).

Since *baptizo* does not always mean immersion, the argument that full submersion is the only valid mode lacks linguistic certainty.

**Biblical Evidence for Different Modes of Baptism**

The New Testament provides examples that suggest different modes of baptism were used:

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[69] James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1890), entry *G907 (βαπτίζω)*.

[70] Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.137, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (London: Harvard University Press, 1927).

[71] Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 345-347.

**A** **Baptism by Immersion**

Jesus' Baptism: *Matthew 3:16* states that Jesus *"came up from the water,"* which suggests immersion but does not explicitly require it. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (*Acts 8:38-39*): The text says they *"went down into the water,"* implying but not proving immersion.

**B** **Baptism by Pouring or Sprinkling**

Pentecost and the Holy Spirit's Outpouring (*Acts 2:17*): Baptism is associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, suggesting that affusion (pouring) reflects this theological imagery. Old Testament Precedents: *Ezekiel 36:25* prophesies, *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean,"* indicating that ritual purification was sometimes done by sprinkling rather than immersion. Hebrews 9:10, 13-14 describes Old Testament baptisms (ritual washings), which were often performed through pouring or sprinkling rather than immersion.

These examples show that the Bible does not mandate a single mode of baptism, allowing for different interpretations based on theological and practical considerations.

**Early Church Practice: Did the Early Christians Immerse?**

The earliest Christian writings and archaeological findings suggest that immersion was practiced, but other modes were also acceptable.

- **The Didache (c. late 1st – early 2nd century):**

  Prescribes baptism in *"living water"* (i.e., running water), but allows pouring if immersion is not possible.[72]

[72] *The Didache*, 7.

- **Early Christian Art and Baptisteries:**

  2nd-5th century depictions of baptisms often show pouring rather than immersion. Baptismal fonts from early churches in Rome and North Africa are often too small for full immersion, suggesting that pouring was common.[73]

- **Tertullian (c. 200 AD):**

  Describes immersion but also acknowledges that some baptisms were performed through affusion.[74]

- **Cyprian of Carthage (c. 250 AD):**

  Defended baptism by affusion for the sick and dying, arguing that the method was less important than the faith behind the act.[75] The historical evidence suggests that immersion was preferred when possible, but pouring and sprinkling were accepted alternatives, especially in cases where immersion was impractical.

**Summary: Does the Mode of Baptism Matter?**

Linguistic Evidence: *Baptizo* has a broad range of meanings, including immersion, washing, and pouring. Biblical Evidence: Both immersion and pouring/sprinkling have theological and scriptural support. Early Church Practice: Immersion was common, but affusion was used when immersion was impractical.

While Baptists and some evangelicals insist on immersion as the only valid mode, the majority of Christian traditions (Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and

[73] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 344-349.

[74] Tertullian, *On Baptism*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, 673-675.

[75] Cyprian, *Epistle 75*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, 398-399.

Reformed) accept various modes of baptism. The key theological takeaway is that the meaning of baptism (identification with Christ) is more important than the method.

## XI. CONCLUSION

The study of baptism across biblical, historical, and theological perspectives reveals that while baptism is deeply significant in Christian faith and practice, it is not an absolute requirement for salvation. Instead, baptism serves as a public declaration of faith, a covenantal sign of inclusion in the body of Christ, and a symbolic participation in His death and resurrection.

### Summary of Key Findings

**A** **Biblical Typology** (*1 Peter 3:14-22*, *1 Corinthians 10:1-4*)

Baptism is linked to Old Testament events such as Noah's flood and the Red Sea crossing, signifying deliverance through water. Baptism functions a declaration of spiritual warfare, renouncing allegiance to the forces of darkness and identifying with Christ's victory.

**B** **Baptism, Circumcision, and Covenant Membership** (*Colossians 2:11-12*)

Paul connects baptism to circumcision, presenting it as a New Covenant sign of belonging to God's people. However, unlike circumcision, baptism is tied to personal faith, making credobaptism (believer's baptism) the stronger New Testament model.

**C** **Baptism and Salvation: Examining Problem Passages** (*Acts 2:38*, *Acts 22:16*, *1 Peter 3:21*)

While some verses seem to link baptism with salvation, closer analysis reveals that faith, not baptism, is the decisive factor in receiving forgiveness. The Greek

grammar in *Acts 22:16* and *Acts 2:38* suggests that repentance and faith precede baptism, rather than baptism causing regeneration. *1 Peter 3:21* clarifies that baptism *"saves"* only as an appeal to God for a good conscience, emphasizing faith over ritual.

### D Historical and Theological Perspectives

Early church fathers overwhelmingly affirmed baptismal regeneration, though some (e.g., Ambrose) recognized *baptism of desire* and *baptism of blood* as alternatives. Catholic and Orthodox traditions continue to affirm that baptism is ordinarily necessary, while acknowledging God's grace outside the sacrament. Lutherans and Anglicans view baptism as a means of grace but not strictly necessary for salvation. Reformed traditions see baptism as a covenantal sign, not an instrument of regeneration. Evangelicals and Baptists emphasize baptism as symbolic, rejecting sacramental views. The thief on the cross (*Luke 23:39-43*) remains a strong biblical counterexample to absolute baptismal necessity, demonstrating that faith alone saves.

### E The Mode of Baptism

Biblical and linguistic evidence shows that the Greek word *baptizo* does not exclusively mean immersion—it can also mean washing, dipping, or pouring. Early church evidence suggests that immersion was common but not mandatory, as pouring and sprinkling were also practiced. Theologically, the mode of baptism is secondary to its meaning, with most Christian traditions allowing for immersion, affusion (pouring), or aspersion (sprinkling).

## Theological Implications

### A Baptism as Identification with Christ

Baptism is not a salvific ritual but an outward sign of inward faith. It is an act of obedience, marking a believer's entrance into the visible church. The spiritual transformation occurs through faith, not the water itself (*Ephesians 2:8-9*).

### B Baptism and the Gospel

The gospel message remains faith alone in Christ alone (*Romans 10:9-10*). Baptism is a response to salvation, not a prerequisite for it.

#### Flexibility in Practice

Given biblical and historical diversity, no single mode of baptism should be dogmatically enforced. While immersion reflects burial and resurrection imagery, pouring and sprinkling align with biblical purification themes.

### C Inter-Traditional Dialogue

Understanding the historical and theological development of baptism fosters greater unity among Christians. Recognizing the theological depth of both sacramental and symbolic views allows for respectful discussion across traditions.

## Final Thoughts

Baptism remains one of the most important and contested doctrines in Christian theology. While it does not cause salvation, it is a vital part of Christian discipleship. The weight of biblical, historical, and theological evidence suggests that baptism functions as a visible sign of an invisible grace, an act of obedience, and a public witness of faith.

Rather than a rigid legalistic requirement, baptism should be embraced as a gift of grace, signifying one's commitment to Christ and inclusion in His body, the Church.

Baptism is more than a theological debate over sacraments and symbols—it is a declaration of war. In *1 Peter 3:21*, Peter explicitly links baptism to Noah's flood, where rebellious spiritual beings (*1 Enoch 6-16*) were judged and imprisoned. This means baptism is a personal commitment to faith and a cosmic act of defiance against the spiritual rulers who once enslaved humanity (*Colossians 2:15*).

Most theological traditions treat baptism as either a sacramental means of grace or a symbolic ordinance. However, viewed through the Divine Council framework, baptism functions as a public renunciation of the dominion of the fallen sons of God. Just as Jesus' resurrection proclaimed victory over the principalities and powers, baptism marks our own participation in that triumph, identifying believers with the new kingdom while rejecting the fallen world system (*Romans 6:3-4*).

Baptism is, therefore, both a covenant sign and a cosmic declaration. While it connects believers to the New Covenant, it also functions as an initiation into God's divine family and an act of spiritual warfare against the enemies of the kingdom. Theologians often miss this reality because they view baptism primarily through human theological categories—but in the ancient Near Eastern worldview, rituals signified divine rulership. Baptism marks one's loyalty to Yahweh and His Messiah, publicly rejecting the authority of the demonic realm.

To be baptized is to take sides in the cosmic war. It is to a ritual of cleansing and a declaration that one belongs to the risen Christ, the victorious Son of Man.

## APPENDIX A: BAPTISM AS A COSMIC AND SPIRITUAL DECLARATION

**Description:** This artistic depiction illustrates the theological and cosmic dimensions of baptism as presented in the study. A figure emerges from the water, radiant with divine energy, symbolizing resurrection and spiritual rebirth. Surrounding him, angelic beings and divine watchers observe, signifying the spiritual realm's awareness of this pivotal moment. The luminous gateway in the heavens represents the believer's transition into the Kingdom of God, echoing themes of divine allegiance and cosmic warfare. The elders in white robes reflect the historical and biblical continuity of baptism as an initiation into God's divine council and His reclaimed people.

This imagery aligns with biblical themes discussed in the paper, including:

- Baptism as spiritual warfare and a declaration to the unseen realm.
- The typology of Noah's flood, the Red Sea crossing, and Christ's resurrection.
- The role of baptism in reversing the effects of Babel and reclaiming the nations under Christ.
- The early church's practice of renouncing Satan and his dominion during baptismal rites.

This image serves as a visual synthesis of the study's arguments, encapsulating baptism as both a personal and cosmic event in the spiritual struggle between Christ's kingdom and the fallen powers.

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