

Chapter 15

THE SACRAMENTS

The number and the form of the sacraments among Christians are quite controversial and are in part what define church denominations. A full discussion of individual denominational beliefs is beyond the scope of this Chapter. Therefore, let's consider specific scriptures to differentiate what the Bible states from opinion and tradition among denominations. Further reading is referenced below (1, 2).

The word 'sacrament' is not found in the Bible. The word is used to describe rites performed by the church. The number is variable but reaches at least as high as 7 in the Catholic Church. Let's consider the **two most common** with the soundest biblical basis.

Although the sacraments are contested among denominations and individuals, what is described in scripture leaves churches free to celebrate in faith the number and form of sacraments they believe correct.

BAPTISM

WHAT PEOPLE DO AND COMMON PERCEPTIONS – Teleios recently completed a survey with 189 mostly evangelical adolescents and young adults. We asked them if they had been baptized and the method. We also inquired as to what baptism signified.

Here are the top 4 answers regarding the method of baptism and some associated meanings:

- **Immersed as a young person or adult (32%)** – Marked differences in the rite of baptism exist across denominations. Immersion baptism, which perhaps most closely represents the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, is preferred strongly by Baptists. They believe generally the rite should be performed after salvation when the convert is old enough to make a responsible decision (3).
 - Many Christians believe it symbolizes primarily a commitment to God by the new believer which was true also in our survey (20%).

- **Sprinkled as a child (23%)** – This form of baptism is preferred by several traditional denominations and is generally believed to convey either:
 - Forgiveness of the sin nature, and prior sins, allowing for a fresh start and working towards salvation, combined with grace (generally a Catholic viewpoint) (4).
 - Salvation in infants too young to make a decision for Christ. This protection lasts to the time of “the age of responsibility” (generally a Presbyterian viewpoint) (5).
 - Commitment by parents to raise a child in a godly manner leaving the responsibility to the child to be saved and baptized as an adult (often non-denominational Bible believing churches) (6).

- **Never been baptized (19%)** – Although this group might be seen as disobedient by some Christians; the New Testament epistles, which contain the injunctions to the church, do not command water baptism. The Quaker church does not perform the rite of baptism (7).
 - Of course, salvation itself is by grace alone with no added works required (Ephesians 2:8-9).

- **Spiritually baptized by the Holy Spirit at salvation (15%)** - This choice is closest to the meaning of baptism in the epistles. Although controversial, in the epistles when baptism is mentioned it speaks generally of spiritual baptism. The apostle Paul explained that spiritual baptism ‘identified’ us in the death and life of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Baptism represents the regeneration by the Spirit to a new person who can serve our Lord. This regeneration appears to occur at salvation accompanied by the sealing of the Holy Spirit (Romans 6: 2-9, Colossians 2: 11-13, Ephesians 2:4-7).
 - Indeed, 68% of the participants in our survey believed baptism represented the regeneration of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Titus 3:5).



WHAT BAPTISM MEANS – First, let’s consider the word itself. The word is βαπτίζω (baptizoo) in **Greek** (the language in which the New Testament originally was written) and was an **old term borrowed from the dye trade. It meant that a piece of cloth immersed in the dye became identified with the new color** (8).

TYPES OF BAPTISM – In the New Testament, baptism’s use can be divided generally into two sections: **(1) the historical books, and (2) the epistles.**

➤ **HISTORICAL BOOKS (the Gospels and the Book of Acts)**

- Historical precedent – Baptism as a rite was known among the Greeks and Jews.
 - Greek mystery religions practiced baptism in the entry of new members into their societies (9).
 - Jews practiced baptism with water under undescribed conditions (10). It appears that baptism as a rite was performed in the gospels and Acts in several instances (Please see below).
- Specific types of baptism are mentioned in the gospels and Acts:
 - *John the Baptist* – He administered the baptism of repentance preparing the way of Christ (Matthew 3:7). This baptism was specific to John the Baptist.
 - *Christ’s baptism* (Matthew 3) – This was specific to Jesus and his commission to be our Savior and the associated testimony of the Holy Spirit and God.
 - *Baptizing by the disciples* – This was done apparently under the direction of Christ (John 3:26; 4:2). Its purpose is not described. It may reflect a baptism of repentance associated with the offer of the Kingdom. However, it would differ from John’s in that Christ had come.
 - *Baptism of fire* (Matthew 3:11) – This meaning is controversial. It may be part of the presentation of Christ and specific to his commission to be our Savior. It may also be associated with the testimony of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Further, it might be due to the purifying nature of Christ’s teaching (11). In contrast, it might reflect future punishment for sinners who do not repent.

- *Christ's baptism for which he was baptized* (Matthew 20:22-23)- This appears to reflect his role, not a rite, as Savior leading to the cross by His obedience. His upcoming suffering is implied in the passage. His disciples wanted to sit with Him in heaven. Christ asked if they could tolerate the suffering on the cross (baptism) with which He was commissioned.
- *Baptism in the Great Commission* (Matthew 28:20) – This refers to baptism most likely in the time of the church. It might refer to the rite of baptism or to the regeneration associated with preaching the gospel as described in the epistles. Spiritual baptism, almost exclusively, is the type mentioned in the epistles.
- *Baptism in the early church* (Acts) – The rite of water baptism appears to have been practiced in the early church. This baptism used water at least in one case (Acts 8:36) but the precise method of baptism is not described in any scriptural instance. Most mentions of baptism are in the early church period, when the church was primarily Jewish based in Jerusalem. Later mentions of baptism are fewer as the church expanded throughout the Roman Empire, but again almost always included Jews or appear Jewish focused (instances up to Acts 19 and 1 Corinthians 1). Events in Acts described after chapter 19 do not specifically mention the rite of baptism again. Nonetheless, the church after the Bible times did perform water baptism (2nd century and beyond). The practice of this rite after the Bible times is at a minimum evidence for our great freedom in how we structure the church in time and place (12).



BAPTISM IN THE EPISTLES.

This is essentially spiritual baptism and is discussed also in Chapter 2 under the section: security of salvation.

- *Spiritual baptism* – This is an important biblical truth vital in understanding who we are as Christians. Our knowledge about baptism will transform the way we think! When we become Christians, we are identified with Christ's gracious death and resurrection. Otherwise, at salvation, our old self died and was buried with Christ. We are raised now to new life with Him and we sit with Him on the right hand of God the Father (Romans 6:2-12; Ephesians 2:4-7; Colossians 2:12-13). Similar concepts in scripture that also appear to speak to spiritual baptism are: regeneration (Titus 3:5), born again (John 3: 5) and a new man (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10).

The importance of spiritual baptism is at least the following:

- *End of believer's sin* – Although every believer sins, we can say 'no' to sin because as a new person in Christ, we have the power to live a victorious life.
- *New life – the reason for the resurrection* – Baptism teaches us the importance of the resurrection because we are raised with Christ to new life without which we would still be dead in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17).
- *Eternal security* – Baptism helps prove we cannot lose our salvation. because scripture does not indicate that if we commit sin our new self can be killed and the old dead self re-resurrected like some bad re-make of the 'Night of the Living Dead'!



In other words, you are transformed permanently to a new life, resurrected with Christ and sitting with Him in heaven. These changes cannot be reversed. What a great comfort we have in the truth of scripture!

- Therefore, as a new person, we are liberated from sin and are free to serve Christ. We cannot be defeated by the misdeeds of our old selves.
- We are not commanded in the epistles, which contain the direction of Christ to the church, to be water baptized. Again, a believer and a church are free to implement the rite out of faith in the manner they believe is correct.
- In the church times, we are regenerated by the Holy Spirit (spiritual baptism) who empowers us to give our whole life as a sacrifice and service ([Romans 12:1-2](#)). Water baptism, when performed by any method, should be understood as a public statement of a person's commitment to Christ by faith to salvation and a symbol of the regenerative work of the Spirit in the person's life (13).
- Baptism of the dead – This is a difficult and controversial verse ([1 Corinthians 15:29](#)). In context, this chapter deals with the importance of the resurrection and the rapture. The Apostle Paul indicates in verses 30 and 31, how he suffers on behalf of those unbelievers to bring them the gospel. These two verses may integrate with [Matthew 20: 22-23](#) with Christ's question to the apostles if they can tolerate the '*baptism with which he is baptized*', which was to suffer on the cross for all men's sins. Therefore, Paul possibly was saying that he was baptized, as an apostle, with a similar mission as Christ to take the gospel to unbelievers, with the accompanying suffering, as a part of his own mission ([Colossians 1:24](#)). The verse reflects Paul's commitment to God's purpose for his life ([Romans 15:15-19](#)).

COMMUNION

(1 Corinthians 11:24-27; Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20; John 6:48-58)

This is the second fundamental sacrament often celebrated by the local church. How is it celebrated, and who serves it, its frequency, its location, setting and the precise elements served, vary widely across denominations. Accordingly, scripture allows great freedom in how churches or individuals celebrate communion. The rite is based on the last supper of Christ, when after the Passover meal, He broke the bread and poured wine to remember His sacrifice upon the cross for sins and our salvation at His coming again. Christ further explains in the Gospel of John that we must eat His flesh and drink His blood to be saved. This passage also appears reflected in the communion meal.

MEANING OF THE ELEMENTS

- **The wine** – The wine represents Christ's blood spilled on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. By drinking the wine we remember that He is a fully sufficient sacrifice for our sins as a pure and perfect savior.
- **The bread** – This represents His broken body on the cross which took the punishment for our sins. By eating the bread, we remember His substitutionary death for us and His glorious resurrection and our accompanying regeneration to new life, access to God, and salvation (John 6:48-58; Hebrews 10:19-20).

- These two elements are typed in the Old Testament, the wine by the sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat at the Day of Atonement for the coverage of sins. The bread is typed by the manna given daily by God that sustained the Israelites in the desert.
- Although some denominations believe (i.e., Catholic, transubstantiation) that our Savior is actually Himself in the elements of the communion meal there is no evidence in scripture to indicate this.
- God graciously has given us a beautiful remembrance of his benevolent death upon the cross and life-giving resurrection for our salvation in the rite of communion. We should remember His death and resurrection frequently in gratitude and responding service ([Philippians 2:12](#); [Romans 12:1](#)).

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