

Being Born of God:
The Role and Significance of Baptism
in Becoming a Christian

Chad Sychtysz

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Published by
Spiritbuilding Publishing
15591 N. State Rd. 9
Summitville, IN 46070

Printed in the United States of America
BORN OF GOD
by Chad Sychtysz

ISBN: 978-0-9829811-5-3

Spiritual “equipment” for the contest of life.



Acknowledgements

THE PRODUCTION OF THIS BOOK was largely a private effort, at least until a working manuscript had been written. At that point, other people became involved—some to refine what was written, others to check my theology (so to speak), and still others to critique the manuscript’s “readability.” I want to thank all these people, and especially Jeff Archer (a fellow minister of the gospel) and Leigh Hubbard for reading through the entire manuscript and offering valuable comments, corrections, and recommendations. I also am deeply appreciative of Carl “Mac” McMurray at *Spiritbuilding Publishing* for continuing to support my writing ministry through his own endeavors. Jamey Hinds, who has done the layout for several of my books, also deserves my heartfelt appreciation for his making my work (literally) look better than when it started. And of course there are friends and family, including my church “family,” who offer all kinds of encouragement and support—I thank you. I especially want to thank my wife, Honey, for always being there, no matter when and no matter what.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
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Part One: What The Bible Actually Teaches On Baptism

Chapter 1: Admission Into Christ's Church	15
Chapter 2: You Must Be Born Again Church	34
Chapter 3: Instruction And Implementation	51
Chapter 4: Washing Away Your Sins	69
Chapter 5: Separation And Identification	90
Chapter 6: The Sign Of The Covenant	104
Chapter 7: The One Baptism	119

Part Two: Challenges To Baptism

Chapter 8: The Thief On The Cross	136
Chapter 9: Hypothetical Arguments	144
Chapter 10: Infant Baptism	159
Chapter 11: The Doctrine Of Calvinism	186
Chapter 12: The Doctrine Of "Faith Only"	207
Chapter 13: The "When" Factor	223
Chapter 14: Common Questions About Baptism	243

Endnotes	281
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Introduction

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:12-13

Born of God.” This phrase brings to mind wonderful things: cleansing, forgiveness, renewal, hope, acceptance, fellowship, love, and salvation itself. This is intentional, since God knows that your soul truly hungers for all of these things.

We have all been born of humankind, and most of us have become disappointed and disillusioned with this birth. It is not just what we have been born *into* that has caused this, but also what we ourselves have done to our own innocence. The world is filled with sin and all the consequences *of* sin, but our own “world”—the sphere of our individual lives—has also been corrupted with *our* sin. Being born of God provides the redemption that we have been seeking. Our new birth in God through Christ gives us more than just forgiveness of our sins; it also makes it possible for us to have communion with God Himself.

But *how* is a person born of God (or, “born again”)? And *when* does this happen? The concept of one’s spiritual rebirth, as well as the occasion of that rebirth, is straightforward and uncomplicated: you die to your old life, and you are born into a new life with God. In being born *of* God, you become identified *with* God. In this process, you

“die” to sin and walk in newness of life with Christ. Simply put, being born of God is the process by which you are made a Christian. A Christian is one who is “in Christ,” having been spiritually enlightened, saved by grace, made a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and “tasted the good word of God” (cf. Hebrews 6:4). He or she is, indeed, a child of God. One who is *not* born of God, however, has not yet become a Christian and remains a captive of “the corruption that is in this world” (cf. 2 Peter 1:4).

The method of becoming a child of God is extremely important to Him; therefore it must also be extremely important to you. But because it *is* so important to Him, you can be sure that His revealed instruction on the matter is very clear and not left to subjective opinions, including yours or mine. A subject so crucial to our salvation cannot possibly be ambiguous or open to various interpretations—all of which are presumed to be equally valid. It is impossible for us to teach divergent and contradictory methods of being born of God and yet somehow all end up “in Christ” as legitimate children of God.

So then, where are you personally in all of this? Have *you* been born of God—and if so, *how* and *when* did this happen? My purpose for asking is not to question your sincerity, for I already assume you are sincere. I cannot imagine someone reading a book like this who believes that he is insincere. But no one is saved or justified by God based upon sincerity alone. God has provided the plan for *how* and *when* to be born of Him; your responsibility is to conform to this plan to the very best of your ability. What we will cover from here forward may or may not support what *you* did, but

it will provide biblical information on what a person *must* do in order to be born of God.

The proposition of this book is that **the New Testament teaches that we cannot be born of God—that is, we cannot become Christians—apart from being baptized *into* Christ.** Baptism marks the occasion of one's conversion to Christ; it symbolizes the death and new birth of the soul that comes to God. Baptism is not a mere ceremonial rite performed *after* one's conversion to Christ; it is a critical necessity *of* that conversion. Even if you have already been baptized into Christ, you would do well to broaden your understanding of this subject. Since everything about your fellowship with God depends upon your having been born of Him, this experience ought to have a profound effect on that fellowship.

Yet, despite all that the New Testament has to say on this—which is more than many people realize—baptism remains at the center of religious controversy. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that water baptism is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, misrepresented, and divisive subjects in the religious world today. Strong disagreement over how to *become* a Christian creates a fundamental division among believers. This division prevents us from going forward with any other religious dialogue: if we cannot agree on how to *be* born of God, then we cannot resolve disagreements beyond this step. Instead, we are divided over whether everyone who *claims* to be born of God really *is* born of Him.

The controversy over baptism largely centers around three major topics: the *role* of baptism in conversion; whether or not baptism is *essential* to salvation; and then *who* can be

baptized. Every self-proclaimed Christian religion seems to have its own version of teaching on baptism. Hardly any of these religions are passive on the subject: either you accept its view on baptism, or you cannot be a part of that religion. In some cases, water baptism is a prerequisite for membership in a congregation *apart from* its connection to one's "born again" experience.

Adding to the controversy over baptism is the fact that not everyone is on the same page as to what the word actually means. In the Bible, "baptism" is a word transliterated (rather than translated) from the original Greek text in which the New Testament was written. The word that the New Testament writers used, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is the exact same word which we have adopted into our English language today. In order to understand what the apostles meant, we have to appeal to the words they used in the language *and* context that they wrote. We cannot give contemporary meanings to ancient words and come up with an accurate representation of what was originally meant. Thus, whatever "baptism" meant to those who wrote it by inspiration of the Holy Spirit is *precisely* what it must mean to us who (allegedly) practice it.¹

In the original (Koine) Greek of the New Testament, "baptism" always meant the same thing: immersion in (something); a whelming (of water, trials, etc.); to make fully wet; specifically, immersion in water as a religious rite as commanded by Christ and His apostles.² Baptism *never* meant pouring or sprinkling; none of the examples of baptism in the New Testament support such interpretations.³ Pouring of water was introduced centuries after the church began in

order to accommodate those on their deathbeds who wanted to be baptized but were deemed too sick or frail to do so.⁴ Sprinkling of water likely was adopted from the ancient practice of sprinkling blood as a means of consecration (as in Exodus 24:8, Hebrews 9:19-22). We will assume that these methods came about with the best of intentions, but having the best of intentions is not interchangeable with *obedience to the command*. Uzzah had the best of intentions when he put out his hand to steady the ark of the covenant during its transport to Jerusalem, yet God struck him dead for irreverence (1 Samuel 6:3-8). Naaman also had the best of intentions when he expected Elisha to perform some great ceremony in order to heal his leprosy, yet he never would have been cleansed until he did what the prophet told him to do—namely, dip himself seven times in the Jordan River (2 Kings 5:1-14). And Apollos had the best of intentions in preaching his limited knowledge of Jesus that he learned through John the Baptist, yet when he was confronted with a fuller understanding of this message he was obligated to preach this instead (Acts 18:24-28). Obedience to God's commands has always been more important than one's feelings or intentions.

Likewise, there are many people today who—with the best of intentions—believe that they have been born of God and thus saved through a means that God never revealed, the apostles never taught, and the early church never practiced. These people may support the practice of baptism itself, but they believe it is something to be taken care of *after* one's conversion, not an essential part *of* conversion. This reduces

baptism to a mere ceremonial act rather than a necessary requirement of those who wish to be born of God.

It is true that baptism is rich with symbolism; it is *not* true that, because it *is* symbolic, it is therefore optional, expendable, or something other than an act of obedience to God. Baptism emulates Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. But He actually died, whereas the believer's death is symbolic; He actually rose from His actual death, whereas the believer is raised in a spiritual context; and so on. Nonetheless, if Christ (through His Word) commands a person who believes in Him to be baptized, then baptism is something *required* of that person and cannot be reduced to anything less than this. Commandments need only to be obeyed, not questioned or interpreted.

The act of baptism is not, however, a mere act of commandment-keeping. It is an illustration of spiritual resurrection, spiritual redemption, and the hope for a future with God. Baptism is nearly always mentioned (from Acts 2 forward) in direct connection with forgiveness, union with Christ, identity with Christ, membership in Christ's spiritual church, cleansing of the human conscience (from the guilt of sin), and calling upon the name of God for salvation. Every time a Christian partakes of communion (the Lord's Supper) he is reminded of the day of his conversion when *his* sins were forgiven because of Christ's atoning death on the cross. In having *died* with Christ, the believer now *lives* with Him; in having died to sin, the believer now lives to God. The great transaction of when he became a "new creature" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17) was not merely something he felt in his heart, but was a real and historical event. Having died *with*

Christ in baptism, the believer can now know that he will receive eternal life according to God's promises (cf. 1 John 5:13).

There are not a variety of "faiths" or gospels taught in the New Testament, but only one. Likewise, there is only "one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5) that is required of you, not several, and not one *of* several. We cannot all claim "One gospel!" but have different (and contradictory) practices *of* that gospel. Likewise, we cannot all claim "One baptism!" but have different (and contradictory) practices *of* or beliefs about baptism. One author writes, "If a church's *practice* is different from the practice of the church in the New Testament, it is likely that its *doctrine* is also different from first-century Christianity."⁵ He means this in an ideal sense, as when the early Christians actually *did* what they were *instructed*. But the point still remains: variant practices will not legitimately arise from a singular instruction.

Believers are not divided on *every* biblical subject, however.⁶ On several significant points, most of those who call themselves Christians are in agreement. We know that we have sinned against God; we also know that God has provided in His Son the remedy for the self-inflicted sabotage of our spiritual well-being. We know that we need Christ's redemption, and that our redemption is ultimately secured through His blood offering on the cross. In other words, we know that we need to be saved, and that this salvation is not predicated upon what we do for God, but what God does for us. We all teach about the grace of God, and we all believe that those who trust in that grace we will be with the Lord in the hereafter.

It is at this point that we begin to diverge in our beliefs, and baptism is a key part *of* that divergence. On one hand, most will be willing to admit the *significance* of baptism. One denominational author, for example sums this up well: “We can agree that baptism is commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ ... and thus should never be treated as trivial. Put simply, baptism is important, and this is why we must be serious about it: baptism is bound up with Christ and his gospel, and this connection makes it important for all who wish to be faithful to Jesus.”⁷ Yet, while most people understand baptism itself to be “important,” many of these also believe that the necessity, timing, and method *of* baptism are not important or are deemed altogether expendable.

Some believe that, since God’s grace is what saves us, therefore we need to do *nothing* in order to save ourselves. Others believe that God’s grace leads us to having faith in Him, rather than the obedience of our faith being that which initiates the salvation of our souls. Thus, baptism is not designed to call upon the name of the Lord, but is something done after one has already been “saved.” Others believe that they were saved when they called upon Jesus for salvation, but that this calling did not involve any “works” on their part. And there are many who simply listen to the words of their pastors and clergymen rather than reading the New Testament themselves.

Part of the problem, then, is that not everyone is coming to the table empty-handed, so to speak. Instead, many strive to defend their predetermined traditional practice or persuasion of belief. The Baptist, for example, seeks to defend the Baptist position concerning baptism. He cites

Scripture, he argues passionately, he believes sincerely. Despite this, he comes *to* the table—and plans to leave *from* the table—as a Baptist, and not as an objective student of God’s Word. The Catholic defends infant baptism because he is a Catholic, not because of what is written in the New Testament (because there is *nothing* written of this in the New Testament). The Mormon defends his “baptism for the dead” (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:29) because that has become a doctrinal practice of Mormonism. The Presbyterian begins his approach as a Calvinist, and thus is already convinced of the Doctrine of Predestination before he ever dives into the doctrine of baptism.

Someone will argue, of course, that I am coming to the table with my *own* religious baggage and bias. In the sense that I am human, I cannot help but do this. But must we defend baptism (or any other subject of the gospel of Christ) in the context of a certain religious affiliation, or is it possible to understand baptism as God *revealed* it to us in His Word? It is my firm belief that baptism *can* and *must* be understood objectively, not in the existing framework of one’s personal beliefs or denominational system.⁸ Otherwise, the very definition of “Christian”—and thus, being “born of God”—is reduced to each person’s opinion of what this means and how it is achieved. We can call this religion if we want to, but it is not the Christianity that Paul and others preached in the beginning. We cannot claim to be keepers of the New Testament pattern while simultaneously ignoring or violating it.

Baptism is not expected of people *after* they have been born of God. Rather, the New Testament instructs those who

are *not* born of God how to *become* born of Him—that is, how to become *Christians*. This instruction also expounds upon this subject in order for those who *are* Christians to better understand their fellowship with Christ *in light of* their baptism. This better knowledge is then expected to be taught by believers to those who have yet to obey God. The entire gospel message was written *not* to make a person a denominationalist, non-denominationalist, or (as is increasingly popular) “un-denominationalist.”⁹ It was written so that we can put our faith—and thus, our souls—in the hands of God’s Son for the purpose of “eternal life” (cf. John 20:31).

My own “position,” if it can be called a position at all, is simply this: God’s Word trumps all man-made or denominational teachings, regardless of what they are, who came up with them, how long they have been around, or how earnestly they are maintained. If God requires believers to be baptized in order to become Christians, then this must be the clear and inescapable conclusion of His revealed Word, this is what must be taught by all those who represent Him, and this will be what I defend. (The same must be true if God does *not* require believers to be baptized.) Upon examination of the evidence, I am confident that the honest and sincere person will come to a clearer understanding of God’s teaching on salvation—and the role of baptism in that salvation. If one truly wishes to be born of God, then he or she will discover how this is to be done by following the apostolic pattern of the New Testament.

What you believe about God and your relationship with Him must be based upon His revealed truth if indeed

you wish to be “approved” by Him (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). A belief system that is based on anything else will lead to spiritual ruin. Thus, whatever you believe—regardless if you are presently in agreement with me or not—I respectfully challenge you to examine the biblical evidence for yourself and see how your own beliefs compare to what God actually teaches. If you are truly a believer, then you will choose to comply with whatever God has said. Jesus Himself said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). This is as true with commandments concerning baptism as it is for anything else for which He has instructed us.

Part One:
What the Bible Actually Teaches on Baptism

Chapter One: Admission into Christ's Church

*See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us,
that we would be called children of God; and such we are.
For this reason the world does not know us,
because it did not know Him.*

1 John 3:1

Before talking about being “born of God,” one must understand the reason why we *need* to be born of God. A person who does not believe that he is lost certainly will not understand the importance of being saved. Likewise, one who believes that his present situation—being born of *man*—will sufficiently prepare him for the afterlife will not be interested in being born of *God*. If one does not sufficiently understand his problem, then he will not see the need for a solution. We are not covering this information because you are necessarily unaware of it, but simply so that we can build a common foundation in order to move onto other things.

The apostle Paul wrote, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world ...” (Ephesians 2:1-2). By “dead,” Paul means separated from God’s fellowship, not completely incapacitated.¹⁰ Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that one who is “dead” to God is completely unable to *hear*, *believe*, and *respond* to the gospel of Christ. Quite the opposite: Paul preached *in order that* people would hear, believe, and call upon the Lord for salvation (see Acts 26:16-

18, Ephesians 4:17-20, Colossians 1:5-7, et al). The one who has sinned against God is thus separated from His fellowship; he becomes a “sinner.” The end result of this separation, provided the breach is never reconciled, will be that person’s spiritual ruin—his “death” in the final and permanent sense.¹¹ Left to ourselves, we are unable to rectify this situation. A corrupted soul simply cannot escape its own corrupted state of being, since that soul is limited and trapped by its own circumstances.

Christ *can* restore our fellowship with God, however, since He has not succumbed to our own affliction (sin) *and* He wields the life-giving power and authority of God Himself. The process by which He brings a person out of his state of spiritual “death” to God is called regeneration [lit., the process of being made alive again]. Thus, in the conversion *from* his sinful state and *into* fellowship with God, this person is forgiven of his sins, sanctified by God’s Spirit, and presented before God as “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” by Jesus Christ (cf. Colossians 1:21-22). He is in fact born of God. The result of this great transaction is that he has become a *Christian*, whereas before he was simply a sinner. The gospel message is preached for this very objective (see 1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Just because Christ is the *Source* of regeneration does not mean, however, that nothing is required of the one who wishes to be “made alive” to God. Peter declared, “It shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). One who is separated from God can indeed call upon Him for salvation—in fact, he cannot be saved unless or until he does so. Christ is the One who brings

him back to life—and thus restores his fellowship with God—and makes him one of His own. Christ never does this against one’s own will, or without one’s full knowledge and consent. There is nothing in Scripture that even hints that Christ regenerates those who do not themselves *choose* to be regenerated.

The sanctuary of regenerated souls is the spiritual body of believers known to us in Scripture as Christ’s church (Colossians 1:18). Those who are born of God are made members of this church by Christ Himself, since He is its head and presides over it with full authority. In other words, those who are born of God are never rogue Christians who “go at it alone” in whatever manner they deem appropriate (or convenient), but are subject to the One who has made them a part of His church. Just as a Christian wife is to subject herself to her husband—regardless of how archaic this seems to many people today—so the church is subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:23-24). If this is expected of the entire church, then it must be expected of each individual believer within the church.

Admittance into God’s fellowship—which is equivalent to one’s salvation—is not decided by one’s subjective determination. God has not put something as critical as the salvation of one’s soul into the hands of mere men, church synods, or denominational officials. Religious *sincerity* cannot be confused with conformity to God’s *doctrine*, since sincerity can never be a replacement for obedience. If you wish to be born of God, then you must abide by the terms and conditions that God the Father has laid down for this. No one can come to the Father except through Christ (John 14:6),

and no one can be “in Christ” who does not become a Christian.

What Being “In Christ” Means (and Does Not Mean)

To appreciate what has just been said, we should pull back and look at the big picture. God’s love is unconditional: He loves all people no matter what. This does not mean He is happy with every person’s decision concerning Him, or that He will automatically save all people. It means that He continues to act in our best interest regardless of what we do or fail to do. God shows kindness to all people—even those who remain in a condemned state of being (Matthew 5:44-45). But in showing such undeserved kindness, He expects more than the sinner’s mere acknowledgement of His existence. Instead, He rightly expects a genuine change of heart toward Him that is proved by obedience. “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience,” the apostle Paul wrote, “not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

Our obedience to God must not be looked upon as some noteworthy effort on our part, or some great favor that we do for Him. Regardless of how much our obedience costs us—in time, effort, and the loss of what must be given up in order to provide it—it is exactly what we should have been doing all along. This is not meant to diminish the difficulty of discipleship; it is meant only to keep things in perspective. “So...when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done’” (Luke 17:10). Even if we lived with perfect obedience after having become Christians, we would

still fail to do more than what God has always required of us in the first place.

And yet the fact remains: none of us *has* lived with perfect obedience, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Since “all have sinned” and fallen, it is necessary to have our innocence restored if we wish to stand justified before God. Sinful people cannot provide the necessary *effort* or *payment* required to overcome the damage caused by even a single human sin. Having broken a single law of God, we become guilty of transgressing the *entirety* of God’s law (James 2:10). However, Christ is the One who makes our justification before God possible. Christ becomes to the believer everything that the believer has failed to be to God. As Paul said, “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

A person cannot obtain these blessings on his own, but “in Christ Jesus” they are given to him by God (Ephesians 1:3). The one who is not in Christ, however, stands outside of God’s fellowship. It is critically important, then, to understand exactly what it means to be in Christ. Being “in Christ” is not to be confused with:

- ❑ *Being a good, moral person (by itself)*. Just because a person thinks he is saved does not make him saved, any more than a person thinking he is an astronaut makes him one.
- ❑ *Feeling saved*. Salvation is an objective reality; it is not a feeling or an emotion. Christ did not die on the cross

so that people could “feel” forgiveness or redemption. He died to actually forgive and redeem human souls.

- ❑ *Claiming to be a Christian* (without having complied with the terms and conditions of becoming a Christian). No one is saved because of what he calls himself. He is saved only because of what he does for God (in faith) and what God does for him (by grace).
- ❑ *Going to church*. This is often reduced to: “Sitting through a church service in a church building.” Many people place a great deal of reverence on church buildings and religious liturgy, but no one has ever been saved by sitting in a building or participating in a church service. Salvation is a deeply personal experience, not an institutional one, and certainly not an environmental one.
- ❑ *Church membership*. Just because a person is a member of a given congregation does not make him “saved.” Furthermore, Christ does not recognize every congregation that invokes His name in what it does. Those churches that stray from the New Testament pattern are told to repent (cf. Revelation 2 – 3), not remain as they are. Straying from the pattern is a sinful action, not an acceptable or harmless one.

Being “in Christ” means being saved: a state of fellowship with God through the redemptive work of His Son. Often, people associate their relationship to God with their personal beliefs or the religious designation they have selected (according to their preferences). Thus, someone will say, “I am a Methodist” or “I am a Catholic”; or, one will say, “I go to this church” or “I go to that church”; or, one might say, “I

believe in this religion” or “I believe in that religion.” Yet no one is saved because of their affiliation with a particular denomination, congregation, or religion. No one is saved because he adopts a particular name or joins himself to a particular movement. One is saved only when he (or she) comes to God through Christ according to the terms and conditions of His covenant—the gospel of Christ.

The gospel’s terms and conditions are the same for every person in every place at any time. The Holy Spirit has revealed what God requires of every person, regardless of human opinions or beliefs to the contrary. Therefore, you will be saved in the same manner as those who were saved in the first century, as recorded in Acts. In coming to God for His salvation, we are all in the same condition: we all have the same problem; we all need the same Savior; we all must obey the same gospel; and we all are born of God and thus made to be “in Christ” through that obedience. No one “in Christ” is superior to anyone else who is “in Christ.” In the Lord’s church, there is no clergy-laity system; “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26). Being a “son of God”—regardless of your physical gender—means that you can look forward to an inheritance from God in Christ.

Things that Complicate the Situation

While the situation explained above is really quite clear and straightforward, it is complicated by at least three things: human emotions, ignorance, and doctrines of men.

Human emotions: Our human emotions can easily interfere with what God has asked of us. This is especially true in the case of one particular *part* of the born-again