



# The Tri-Cities Edifier

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## Uncontroversial Baptism

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There was much controversy surrounding Jesus Christ in the first century, and there remains much controversy in the 21st century. Essentially controversies are disagreements, and we see them in all realms of life. They are not unique to religions. Yet, we should expect controversies in matters of faith because there will always be believers and unbelievers. If faith has any meaning at all, then it must be a matter of some controversy.

Of course, the controversies range all over between believers and unbelievers as well as between believers and believers. Jesus was and is a controversial person of history. Jesus often found himself in the midst of controversies with the religious leaders of His day. His claims were controversial. To avoid all controversy is to avoid Jesus. Some people enjoy controversy and others avoid it for a variety of reasons, but neither the enjoyment nor the avoidance of controversy are Christ-like.

The earliest of Jesus' followers were not immune to controversy even among themselves from time to time. From the petty discussions of Jesus' apostles about which of them was the greatest to the much more significant matters related to converting Gentiles to Christ, from the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark to the much more consequential issue of the Word becoming flesh, controversy in some form was ever-present. However, it is also interesting to consider something that does not appear to have been a matter of controversy in Scripture but is a matter of controversy among professing believers today...baptism. Of course, there is much to consider on the subject of baptism because it is spoken about so frequently in the New Testament, but our focus will be on some positive affirmations made about baptism and its connections to Jesus Christ.

Jesus' own words (following His resurrection and just prior to His ascension back to heaven) emphasize baptism in making disciples of all nations) Matt. 28:19). The book of Acts makes it clear that the first preachers of the gospel did what Jesus asked them to do in making disciples.

In the very first gospel sermon, Peter affirmed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and His subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The awful realization (of some who believed the apostolic witness) that they were guilty of crucifying their Messiah prompted the plaintive cry of "What shall we do?" Peter's reply informed them (and us) of the necessary response. Note this well—Peter taught that both the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit belong to those who repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38).

When he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip began where the Ethiopian was reading (i.e. Isaiah 53) and "preached Jesus to him." That's all we are told before the Ethiopian observed water and asked to be baptized (Acts 8:35,36). Preaching Jesus to the uninitiated should have those who desire to follow Jesus asking to be baptized. Why? Where would they get that idea? Baptism is fundamental to preaching Jesus as the crucified but risen Lord. This is made clear in Jesus' own instructions to make disciples and in reply to the first penitent cry of "What shall we do?"

When Saul of Tarsus met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus told the blinded persecutor to enter the city where he would be told what he should do. In the account of Acts 9 we are not told all that Ananias said, but what is emphasized is that he had come that Saul might receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit (v 17). The narrator's parallel in the

following verse is enlightening“ .He received his sight at once and he arose and was baptized” (v .(18 In another account, we learn that Ananias prodded Saul to“ Arise and be baptized and wash away [his] sins calling on the name of the Lord ” .(22:16)

There are other examples which might be cited to show the role and significance of baptism as instructed by Jesus and His apostles and prophets .However, what I want us to see is that there was no controversy about the place of baptism among the first Christians. Indeed, in none of Paul’s letters does he attempt to convince people of their need to be baptized. Consistently, Paul’s references to baptism in his letters are reminders of what all had already done .There was no controversy over baptism as there was about circumcision (e.g .whether or not it was necessary, required, essential .(

To demonstrate the unanimity of thought about baptism among the earliest Christians, consider Paul’s observations in his letter to the Roman saints. In that letter ,he is clearly addressing matters of some controversy with regard to justification by faith versus justification by the works of the law. In that context, Paul sought to answer those who maligned the gospel he preached. (It appears that Paul’s detractors parodied his preaching of justification by faith by suggesting that if what Paul taught was true, one might as well continue in sin so that God’s grace could abound all the more.) To answer this matter of controversy, Paul pointed to what they all had in common—they had all been baptized into Jesus (Rom. 6:1ff .(Baptism is used by Paul as an uncontroversial point of common ground to address a matter of controversy. Baptism is presented as being into Christ and into His death. It is a type of the crucifixion of self, dying to sin, burying the old man, and rising to walk in newness of life. There weren’t some saints who were baptized and some who were not. This is what they all had in common, and it is on this basis of baptism that Paul reasons that grace is clearly not a license to sin .

Because of baptism’s association with Jesus Christ, our forgiveness of sins and new life, and its placement in his argument of salvation by grace versus law, it is clear that Paul considered baptism wholly a matter of grace and faith. (The very same point is also demonstrated in Galatians 3:24-27.) Why then, two thousand years later, is baptism a matter of controversy and relegated by some as a matter of works versus grace? Because some have embraced doctrines which are foreign to and/or inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In summary, Paul associated baptism with grace and faith and described it as being into Christ and into His death. Paul’s letters to Christians were not written to convince them of their need for baptism. This was assumed because baptism was so foundational to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ from the very beginning. There were controversies that had to be dealt with among the first Christians, but baptism into Christ was not one of them .Paul did not write to warn against those who taught that baptism was for the remission of sins. This is because baptism into Christ was for the remission of sins, and this was accepted by all. Baptism into Christ was commonly accepted as a matter of faith in Jesus Christ and as accessing God’s grace because baptism was seen—not as a means of justification by law or works—but as God’s gracious offer to justify us by faith.