

What Constitutes Legitimate Baptism?

By Terry Moore and Art Braidic

© 2016, 2023 the Eternal Church of God

All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

Many religious organizations calling themselves Christian teaching a doctrine of baptism. However, most of the methods among these various sects do not agree with the Scriptures. God indicated that He would call people from different walks of life up to the end of the age (Mat. 20; Acts 11). Some of these individuals may have experienced baptism by organizations that are not a part of God's Church. This has prompted some to wonder if baptisms performed outside of God's Church are legitimate. Others have questioned their baptism when it was later discovered that the minister who performed it did not remain faithful. What are the requirements of a valid baptism?

Repentance

According to the Scriptures, not all baptisms are legitimate. First, the baptism taught by Christ and the New Testament Church must include repentance. This is something that can only be started by a person who is either an adult or is at least within the age of recognizing and understanding mature behaviors and responsibilities. Only then can an educated decision be made to accept the responsibilities following baptism. As the Apostle Peter stated:

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

This explains that there is a process of baptism that begins with repentance. Christ made this point clear when He began to preach publically by stating, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mat. 4:17). Repentance requires regret of sins previously committed. But this is not all. Real repentance demands that the individual change. They are to turn from a life of practicing sin and dedicate themselves to living righteously. As Christ stated:

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

The only way to attain the Kingdom of God is to seek His righteousness. Seeking God's righteousness means to live by His commandments. As King David wrote "all Your commandments *are* righteousness" (Psa. 119:172). Therefore, keeping God's commandments is a necessity for all who hope to be saved. These laws include the Ten Commandments, the annual holy days, abstaining from unclean meats, tithing, and works of faith.

Therefore, even if an individual professed to accept Christ and was baptized, if they did not understand the need to keep the commandments, true repentance was absent and the baptism was of no value. Each must turn from the way of disobeying God's law to faithfully striving to follow Him. Christ's profound words exemplify the vital truth that each must first experience this change of heart, mind, and action in order to have eternal life:

Unless you repent you will all likewise perish (Luke 13:5).

Because of the importance of true repentance, child baptisms are invalid. A child cannot understand the extent of what is required of Christians. Even if their parents understood the truth, comprehending God's law cannot occur until a child's mind has matured enough to distinguish the scope of right from wrong. Only a mature individual can understand the requirements found in the commandments. Then they can decide whether they will dedicate their lives to Christ or not. This is evidenced by the Savior instructing believers to consider what is necessary to become His disciple (Luke 14:23-33).

Therefore, anyone baptized as a child or without a level of true repentance must be re-baptized once they comprehend the need to change their ways and keep the commandments.

Immersion

The next step to legitimate baptism is total submersion in water. Notice the example of the Savior's baptism by John the Baptist:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John *tried to prevent Him*, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit *it to be so* now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, **Jesus came up immediately from the water**; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him (Matthew 3:13-16).

Matthew's gospel indicates that Christ "came up" from the water after being baptized. This indicates that the Messiah was immersed and then rose up out of the water. John Gill wrote the following regarding Christ's baptism:

We learn this from it, that since it is said, that he came up out of the water, he must first have gone down into it; must have been in it, and was baptized in it; a circumstance strongly in favour of baptism by immersion: for that Christ should go down into the river, more or less deep, to the ankles, or up to the knees, in order that John should sprinkle water on his face, or pour it on his head, as is ridiculously represented in the prints, can hardly obtain any credit with persons of thought and sense (*An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, Mat. 3:16).

In addition to Christ's baptism, John the Baptist went baptizing "in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there" (John 3:23). If baptism only required sprinkling or pouring of water there would be no need to go to a place with an abundance of water. Only immersion would require an area with a great deal of water. This fact is also demonstrated by the example found in the baptism of a eunuch by Philip:

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, *here is* water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him (Acts 8:36-38).

Philip and the eunuch went down into the water. If it was not necessary to be immersed there would be no need to go into a pool of water.

The word “baptized” also presents evidence of this truth. It comes from the Greek *baptizo* meaning, “to *make whelmed* (that is, *fully wet*).” This Greek expression is derived from *bapto* meaning, “to *whelm*, that is, cover wholly with a fluid” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, G907; G911).

Further evidence is found in what baptism represents. The fact that a convert must be covered in water portrays putting our old way of life to death and becoming a new creation. It also portrays the ultimate destiny of those who will be chosen. As the Apostle Paul explained:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore **we were buried with Him through baptism into death**, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now **if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him** (Romans 6:3-8).

When a convert seeks baptism, they demonstrate that they are willing to put the person they once were to death through the act of being buried in a type of watery grave. They are then raised a new person—cleansed from sins that are past (Rom. 3:25). This ceremony also reflects the individual’s belief that they will one day die and be raised to eternal life at Christ’s return. The fact that baptism represents burial in the grave further shows why complete immersion is required.

These examples prove that the biblical method of baptism requires the individual to be submersed in water. Any ceremony that does not include immersion is not baptism.

Laying on of Hands

Another essential aspect of conversion is receiving the Holy Spirit. Having the Holy Spirit is vital for those who hope to obtain eternal life. As Paul stated:

Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His (Romans 8:9).

The Spirit of Christ is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit which the Savior said God would send after His resurrection. If we do not have this Spirit, we are not a part of the body of Christ’s Church (Eph. 1:22-23). This Spirit is given to believers through a process of repentance, baptism, and then the laying on of hands.

It is understood that the apostles repented and were baptized (John 3:22-23). However, the apostles did not receive the Holy Spirit until after Christ’s resurrection. As was foretold:

For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now (Acts 1:5).

The apostles and many of Christ’s disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost following Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2). This unique event occurred without the laying on of hands. In fact, there are other examples of people who received the Holy Spirit without having hands laid on them by a priest or prophet.

However, these cases are unique. The method prescribed to the New Testament Church is for baptized members to have hands laid on them in order to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-

17). This is a foundational doctrine of Christ's Church shown to us also in the book of Hebrews:

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary *principles* of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, **of laying on of hands**, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-2).

A requirement of laying on of hands is that only ordained elders in God's Church are to perform this service. Notice the following example of believers in Samaria:

But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, **they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit** (Acts 8:12-15).

Philip was a deacon and responsible for various duties in assisting the Church leadership. He was able to baptize those who had repented and desired to keep God's law. However, only ordained elders were permitted to lay hands on these converts in order for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

This process of repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands was practiced throughout the congregations that were forming in the region. A man known as Simon was so impressed with the divine power of this method that he tried to bribe the apostles into giving him this power:

And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:18-19).

These Biblical examples explain what is required of Christians. The believer must repent, be baptized, and have hands laid on them by an ordained minister in God's Church in order to receive the Holy Spirit.

Rebaptism

The New Testament books show us God's desired method of baptism. Those who have been baptized in other ways must consider rebaptism. Notice the example of some in Corinth who were baptized without fully understanding what was required of them:

And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." **When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.** And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:1-6).

Although these believers were baptized as a result of the repentance preached by John the Baptist, it is apparent that they did not understand the extent of John's message. They did not know about Christ and therefore did not fully understand what God requires of those called to become members of His Church. For this reason, Paul baptized them again before laying hands on these disciples. This example shows us that rebaptism is appropriate when individuals did not understand God's requirements beforehand.

Isolated Cases

There have been a few cases where a person understands the need to keep God's commandments and desires to be baptized, but circumstances do not allow for them to visit with a minister in God's true Church. What are such individuals to do?

Several of the well funded Churches of God have congregations around the world with the ability to send ministers to various locations globally. Sincere believers who do not have an elder near them may contact one of these organizations and arrange for a meeting. If this does not work out, for one reason or another, realize that God will provide a way. However, the following example is entirely unique.

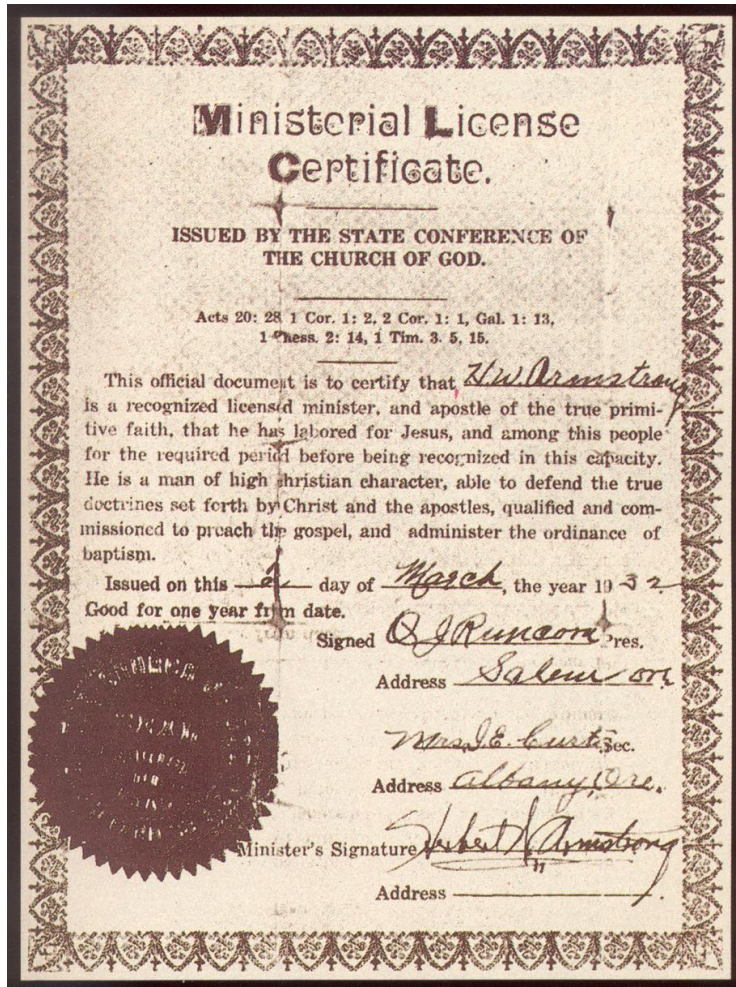
Herbert W. Armstrong was a man of great faith who did an enormous work for God's Church. After being called, Mr. Armstrong came to understand many truths not taught by the religious organizations of his time. He soon realized the necessity of baptism and counseled with several religious leaders. Herbert was eventually baptized in the summer of 1927 by Dr. Dean who was a Baptist minister in Portland, Oregon. As Mr. Armstrong later wrote:

A Baptist minister had the best and clearest explanation (regarding baptism), and was warm and friendly and, I felt, more spiritual in a sane and sensible way. So I asked him to baptize me, not into his church, but into Christ. For this I had to obtain permission from the rather august and dignified Board of the Church. On being baptized I *knew* God then and there gave me HIS HOLY SPIRIT! (*The Good News*, Aug. 1969, p. 4).

Herbert Armstrong's account is noteworthy in that he was not yet associated with the Church of God, and was baptized outside of God's Church. There is also no mention of laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit. However, what must be understood is that Herbert Armstrong's situation was exceptional such as that of Cornelius (Acts 10). Nonetheless, Mr. Armstrong understood the need to keep God's law and had repented of his sins. He was also baptized by immersion. Writing of this event later, Herbert stated:

Immediately upon coming up out of the water, I definitely experienced a change in attitude and in mind generally. I had already repented and surrendered to God's rule over my life. The natural carnal hostility to God and His Law already had gone (*Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, pp. 319-320).

The circumstances of Mr. Armstrong's baptism must be recognized. This great man of faith was called during the fifth era of God's New Testament Church. It was an age when the truth was only partially understood. The era of Sardis had the name Church of God with a small number of Sabbath keeping organizations, but their dedication to teaching God's truth was so weak that it was as if they were a dead Church (Rev. 3:1-2). Herbert Armstrong was called to begin a new era of God's Church that would eventually perform a worldwide work. When his work began Herbert had had hands laid on him by Church of God ministers who ordained him an apostle.



Most Church of God members agree that Herbert Armstrong was called to restore many truths that had been lost for centuries. He was used by God to instruct tens of thousands of believers. ALL Church of God organizations today stand on the shoulders of this man whom the Eternal used to begin the Philadelphian era of God's Church.

Thus we see that there are a handful of unique situations like that of Abraham, Elijah, John the Baptist, Cornelius, and Herbert Armstrong where the Holy Spirit was given without baptism or the laying on of hands. However, such cases are exceptional and do not fall within the instructions found in the New Testament that were validated by Christ (Mat. 3:14-16).

Herbert Armstrong's example indicates that the requirement for baptism is not related to the person performing it as much as it is to the individual experiencing it. The requirement for the person being baptized is repentance of sin and acceptance of Christ and God's law. As the Savior stated:

If you love Me, keep My commandments (John 14:15).

Does a Minister's Continued Faithfulness Matter?

The last era of God's Church has suffered an apostasy and a scattering of the flock. Some ministers who were once faithful to the Church have gone astray. Many of these men had

previously baptized numerous individuals. This has caused some Church members to wonder if baptisms that were performed by such ministers are valid. The examples previously discussed help us to understand the answer to this question.

Even though a minister may have strayed from the faith, such behavior does not affect those who are faithful. As previously stated, the act of baptism is focused on the individual being baptized. Further, a minister who was faithful when the baptism occurred simply served as a conduit performing an important service for God and His people. Therefore, a minister who does not remain faithful does not affect the validity of baptisms he previously performed.

Baptism is an enactment providing evidence that the new convert understands he or she is putting their old way of practicing sin to death. Being raised up out of the water portrays becoming a new person cleansed of sin. This process pictures our ultimate death and resurrection from the grave. Therefore, those desiring baptism should repent of their sins, commit to living by God's law, and seek out an ordained minister to perform the baptism by full immersion. And then this man should lay hands on them while praying that they receive the Holy Spirit.