

“Look, Here is Water”: Baptism in the Book of Acts

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The title of my presentation today comes from a scene in chapter 8 of the book of Acts. The evangelist Philip has just been to Samaria to spread the good news of Jesus and, in a rather startling turn of events, the Holy Spirit whisks him off to Gaza—essentially in the middle of nowhere at that time—on a road that leads from Judea to north Africa. Along this road comes an important man from Africa, an Ethiopian, traveling in a chariot and reading a scroll of Isaiah as he goes. The man invites Philip into the chariot, where they talk about a passage in Isaiah and about Jesus. After an extended conversation, they come to a place where there is water, and the Ethiopian man says: “Look, here is water! Is there anything preventing me from being baptized?” (Acts 8.38). After the chariot pulls over, the man and Philip go into the water together, where Philip baptizes him. Then the man goes on his way rejoicing, and we find out nothing more about him.

As I grew up in the Churches of Christ, I heard about Acts a lot. In fact, I somehow got the message that Acts was mostly about baptism, that baptism in Acts was pretty simple and straightforward, and that the story of the Ethiopian man epitomized this simplicity. Whenever you come to believe in Christ, and there is water available, you “just do it”—like the Nike ads, I suppose—and that’s that.

Since then, I’ve spent a lot of time studying the book of Acts, and my ideas about baptism in Acts have changed. On the one hand, it is accurate to say that baptism plays an important role in the story told by Luke, the author of Acts. This emphasis becomes particularly clear when you compare the book of Acts with the rest of the New Testament. Together, the Gospels have only four references to water baptism associated with Jesus (other than the baptism of John).¹ Paul mentions baptism into Christ in eight passages.² Hebrews and 2 Peter each mention baptism once. If you are counting, that brings us to a total of fourteen references to baptism in Christ in the New Testament, not including Acts. By comparison, Acts itself has nine passages depicting baptism in Christ. For those who like statistics, we can put it this way: Acts makes up 13% of the New Testament but contains 39% of the material on baptism into Christ. It is safe to say that baptism is significant to the story.

But on the other hand, while Luke surely features baptism in Acts, baptism remains only one aspect of a much bigger story.³ And while baptism seems pretty straightforward for the eunuch, other scenes in the Acts offer a more complex picture of baptism. Overall, Acts’ presentation of baptism is far richer, theologically, than the just-do-it impression I had earlier in my life. In fact, we find not one but three types of baptism in the book of Acts. First, there is water baptism in the name of Christ—as we see with the Ethiopian man. Second, John’s baptism plays a surprisingly large role in the story: Acts refers to John’s baptism seven times—only two times

1 1 Matthew 28.19; John 1.33; 3.22; 4.1–2. In addition, Jesus uses the word *baptism* as a metaphor: for his death (“be baptized with the baptism I experience”, Mk 10.38–39) or for his coming ordeal by fire, which may also refer to his death (Luke 12.50). Of course, all four gospels have numerous references to John’s baptism.

2 Romans 6.3–8; 1 Corinthians 1.13–17; 12.13; 15.29; Galatians 3.27; Ephesians 4.5; Colossian 2.12.

3 For example, with regard to human responses to the gospel, Luke appears to be more interested in faith, which appears seventeen times in Acts.

fewer than Acts refers to baptism into Christ. Third, several stories feature baptism of the Holy Spirit, a different phenomenon from water baptism into Christ.

This complex portrait of baptism in Acts raises this question: how do these three baptisms—John’s water baptism, Jesus’ baptism of Holy Spirit, and Jesus’ water baptism—relate to each other? And however we might wish for Luke to give us an easy answer to this question, the author apparently has no interest in laying out a formula. Instead, he shows us the early followers of Christ living real lives, in all their messy glory. He tells the story of people doing their best to be faithful while they respond to other people with varying experiences and to circumstances that surprise them. My goal in this presentation is to provide an overview of baptism in Acts by setting its stories of baptism into the larger story that Luke tells, while also paying attention to some of the complexities that Acts presents. I will conclude with a few musings on how this ancient, real-life story might inspire our faith and practice today.

Three Types of Baptism in Acts 1–2

Acts 1–2 includes all three kinds of baptism, so it is a good place to begin. As the story opens, Luke offers a contrast between John’s water baptism and Jesus’ baptism in the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit appears first. Jesus says that his disciples should wait for what the Father has promised, which he told them about before. Then he speaks about baptism: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1.5).⁴ In response, the disciples ask Jesus when the kingdom will be restored to Israel. Their question has in the mind a political kingdom of earthly power and the expectation that God would overturn the oppression of the people of Israel. They likely envision the Romans being pushed out of the land.

While we might miss the significance of this question as modern readers, it represents the most pressing issue at the beginning of Acts. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus’ death at the hands of the Romans devastates his followers because they believed he was the Messiah, the one to accomplish the long-awaited restoration of Israel (Luke 24.19–21). With his death, he becomes just one more prophet executed by a foreign oppressor.

However, when they witness and become convinced of Jesus’ resurrection, they realize that despite his execution, he really is the Messiah. And then the risen Jesus opens the scriptures to them, showing them how God intended all along that the Messiah would suffer and only after that enter into his glory (Luke 24.26–27, 44–49). Having had their world shaken up a bit, they want to know, now that Jesus has been raised: “Is *now* the time you will restore Israel?”

Jesus answers in an interesting way: first a negative statement and then a positive one. On the negative side, he deflects their question about timing. They cannot know dates and times. Asking *when* is not really the right question. On the positive side, Jesus returns to the topic he has just raised: the subject of the Holy Spirit. “But *you* will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be *my witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8; emphasis mine). By this response, Jesus suggests the right question to ask—not *when* God will restore Israel but *how* God will restore Israel. And the answer is that God is going to use *them*! Moreover, redemption will come not through military activity but by testimony: they will *witness* to Jesus.

In my view, the people in Acts experience two big surprises as the story runs its course: Jesus’ answer to their question about restoration is the first. The disciples have not anticipated that God’s redemption will come through their testimony. But even though Jesus’ commission to them comes as a surprise, their immersion into the power of the Almighty—this baptism with the Holy Spirit of which Jesus speaks—will empower them to witness to the life, ministry, suffering, and resurrection of the Messiah before the wide world.

In the passage just discussed, Jesus contrasts this baptism by the Holy Spirit with John’s water baptism, a baptism not of witness but repentance (Luke 3.3; Acts 1.5). As Acts reminds us, John’s baptism marked the beginning of God’s work among the people of Israel through Jesus (Acts 1.22; 10.37). It also prepared people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, a point that Paul reiterates in the book of Acts. In a speech to a synagogue

4 In the gospel of Luke, John says something very similar, right before Jesus comes to him to be baptized (Luke 3.16).

in Pisidian Antioch, Paul says that “John proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel” (Acts 13.24). He also makes the point that this baptism is preparatory—it points to the one who comes after John (Acts 13.25). Later, in Ephesus, Paul will say something similar: “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19.4).

In his gospel, Luke similarly depicts John’s baptism as preparatory. In chapter 7, Jesus calls John “more than a prophet” (Luke 7.26). However, Jesus goes on to say that “the least in the kingdom of God is greater than [John]” (Luke 7.28). While John prepared the way for Jesus, he did not bring the kingdom of God. Luke then explains that the baptism of John empowered the people—even tax collectors—to recognize the justice of God (Luke 7.29). In other words, John’s baptism—and particularly the repentance it symbolized—allowed people to recognize that the long-awaited restoration had arrived in Jesus. But some people, by refusing this repentance, rejected God’s purpose (Luke 7.30). Luke views repentance as critical for recognizing the good news that comes through Christ.

Repentance means not only changing our opinions but also making a turn toward God. Repentance is redirection: heading down a path away from God, we turn, taking another path back toward the Lord and realigning ourselves with our creator. Luke-Acts closely associates this realignment with how we treat other human beings. John the Baptist defines the redirection of repentance this way: If you have two coats, share one with someone who needs it. If you are a tax collector, don’t take more from people than you should. If you are a soldier, be content with your wages and don’t extort money from the people over whom you have power. Repentance bears fruit in such actions as these (Luke 3.8–14; Acts 26.20).

This view of repentance reveals why Luke views John’s baptism as the beginning of the story. John’s water baptism, along with its accompanying repentance, prepares people for the arrival of the kingdom. Now, in Acts 1, the baptism with the Holy Spirit signals the culmination of this restoration in Jerusalem and the beginning of its movement outward to the ends of the earth. By reminding us of John’s baptism, Acts forges a link between what has gone before and the new work God is doing through Jesus.

This connection continues into the well-known scene in Acts 2, which features the narrative’s first instance of water baptism into Christ. Gathered in an upper room, the disciples wait for the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised. They hear a rush of wind, flames appear above their heads, and they begin to speak in tongues: that is, they speak, and people in the audience—Jews from all over the Mediterranean gathered to celebrate Pentecost—hear them in their own languages. Some people say they are drunk. Luke does not make it clear whether the accused drunkards are the apostles or the people who claim to hear them in their own languages. But in any case, Peter stands up to address the crowd, saying that no, these men are not drunk. Instead, what the crowd sees—the outpouring the Holy Spirit—fulfills an ancient prophecy by Joel about the restoration of Israel (Acts 2.17–18). In other words, the baptism of the Holy Spirit shows that God is fulfilling God’s promises to redeem Israel. The time has come that everyone—male, female, slave, free, old, and young—anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2.19–21).

Peter goes on to describe Jesus’ powerful deeds, known by the crowd, and interprets a passage from the Psalms as indicating the resurrection of the Messiah. He then witnesses to this resurrection, along with the other apostles, and links everything back to the baptism of the Holy Spirit: the resurrected Jesus—exalted at the right hand of God—pours out the very Spirit predicted by Joel and experienced by the crowd. Peter concludes his speech with a bold accusation: “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2.36).

The audience must be tracking with Peter because, instead of getting angry, they are cut to the heart—that is, they are in acute distress—and say, “What should we do?” In context, they mean, “We have been waiting all these years for God to redeem us, and we missed it. What should we do?” Peter replies, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2.38–39).

The people in the crowd had a first chance, before Jesus’ death, to recognize the work of God in the world, but they did not. Now, through Jesus and the Holy-Spirit-empowered witness of the apostles, Peter gives them a

second chance to repent, calling them to adjust their path and reorient to God, in order to become part of the restored community forming through Christ. In this reorientation, baptism in Christ parallels John's baptism.

So, too, both kinds of baptism facilitate forgiveness of sins. Jesus inaugurates a merciful kingdom, and the idea of forgiveness through faith in Christ appears throughout the book of Acts (5.31; 10.43; 13.38; 26.18). It is also helpful to look back at Luke 7. A woman comes into a Pharisee's house, where Jesus is eating, and anoints Jesus' feet with oil. In his heart, the Pharisee questions Jesus' interaction with this woman, who has a sinful reputation. In response to his unspoken thoughts, Jesus tells a parable about debts being forgiven and then he says this: "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little" (Luke 7.47).

In this scene, Jesus makes clear the connection between forgiveness and the new path of love that repentance sets us on. This story explains why those who have two cloaks can share one: because they have been forgiven much by Christ, they love much. Luke-Acts depicts sin as an oppressive burden that Christ lifts from us, so that we might act more lovingly toward others. We often think of repentance and forgiveness as personal: something between an individual person and God. But Luke-Acts shows us that repentance and forgiveness are also communal: they transform us so that we live together in a new way. We see this transformation right after Peter's sermon in Acts, when the community of Christ begins to share everything in common so that none have any need (Acts 2.44–45).

Notice that in the story of the woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7, forgiveness comes through Christ, who proclaims and gives it. Likewise, in Acts 2, Peter announces baptism as baptism *in the name of Christ*. From this detail, we understand that while John's baptism and baptism in Christ share two important aspects in common—repentance and forgiveness—they are not identical. With the resurrection, water baptism becomes something new. No longer does it simply prepare people for the kingdom: it immerses them into it. It brings people into a new reality or, to put it another way, into the *person of Christ*, and in that person, we experience forgiveness so profound and complete that we learn truly to love. Repentance into Christ produces a transformed life. With this observation, we may return to the key issue raised by the disciples and Jesus at the beginning of Acts: how will God restore Israel? The restoration happens in Acts through the formation of a community of people who are forgiven by, immersed in, and transformed by Jesus.

Peter's instruction about baptism not only links baptism in Christ back to John's baptism, but it associates it with the baptism of Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38), which the apostles have already experienced (Acts 1.5).⁵ The gift of the Spirit is not reserved for a few leaders but pours out on all who trust in Christ, in keeping with Joel's prophecy. Since Jesus has already connected this immersion in the Holy Spirit with mission, we understand that the three thousand people who now turn to God, trust in Christ, and receive baptism, also receive the power to witness for Christ to the ends of the earth.

Other Scenes of Baptism in Acts

Following Acts 2, Luke narrates seven additional scenes featuring baptism. The first two are associated with the activities of Philip and the remaining five with Paul's mission. In these scenes of baptism, God welcomes people marginalized or rejected by others, as the restored community expands across the Roman Empire.

Philip, a Greek-speaking Jewish follower of Christ, goes to Samaria, a region populated by people who view themselves as authentically following the God of Israel, but whom the Jews view as worshipping wrongly. From the Jewish perspective of the time, these people are very much on the margins of God's people. In response to Philip, the Samaritans believe the good news about the kingdom of God "and the name of Jesus Christ," and they are baptized (Acts 8.12). Later, Peter and John come from Jerusalem and discover that

⁵ I do not mean to specify the nature of this association, as the precise relationship between water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit is a debated issue. Many interpret the gift of the Spirit ("you will receive") as coterminous with water baptism in Acts 2.38. However, others argue that the future receipt of the Spirit could follow at any point, pointing out that in other scenes, receipt of the Spirit and water baptism do not occur at the same time. Once, the Spirit comes before baptism (Acts 10.47–48); other times, well after (Acts 8.15–16; 19.5–6).

while the Samaritans have been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, they have not received the Holy Spirit. After Peter and John place their hands on them, the Spirit arrives.

Following this story, the Spirit takes Philip away to meet the Ethiopian man I mentioned earlier. Because this man has gone to worship in Jerusalem, we ought to view him as Jewish. There was, in fact, a population of Jewish people in Ethiopia at the time. However, Luke also describes him as a eunuch, and this fact places him, like the Samaritans, very much at the fringe of the people of Israel. The procedure that made him a eunuch would also have made him impure, unable to worship in the temple (Deuteronomy 23.1). Since he has just returned from Jerusalem, when Philip meets up with him, we might imagine him as keenly aware of his exclusion. From this perspective, his question—"Here is water, is there anything to prevent (*kōluō*) me being baptized?"—is far from rhetorical (Acts 8.36). He means, "Does God accept me?" His baptism, then, represents God's resounding "Yes!" Along with the baptisms of the Samaritans, it symbolizes and affirms that the kingdom of God and the name of Christ welcome all: even people others marginalize, even someone formerly excluded by the purity laws of scripture.

Philip does not talk to the eunuch on his own: the Spirit arranges their meeting. This prodding by the Spirit occurs often in Acts: immersion with the Holy Spirit not only empowers the witnessing of the good news but also sets the direction of that witness. In other words, God—not humans—is opening the kingdom to those formerly excluded. This point becomes especially important in the story as we move toward the second big surprise for the people in Acts. The Spirit will direct the message of Christ not simply to people on the margins of the Jewish community—like the Samaritan and the eunuch—but beyond it entirely, to the Gentiles.

This expansion to the Gentiles begins when Jesus appears dramatically to Paul, who is traveling toward Damascus to persecute followers of Christ there. Jesus says that God has chosen Paul to bring the good news not only to the people of Israel but also to the Gentiles. Like the people in Acts 2, who also initially rejected Jesus, Jesus gives Paul a second (rather intense) chance to reorient his path and, like them, he receives baptism, calling on the name of Christ to wash his sins away (Acts 9.18; 22.16).

But even though Paul will play the primary role in Acts in taking the good news to the Gentiles, Peter does so first. The story turns to focus on Cornelius, a Roman centurion but also a God-fearer, who lives in Caesarea on the coast. With the description "God-fearer," Luke identifies Cornelius as a Gentile who honors the God of Israel, studies the teachings of Judaism, and seeks to follow the moral component of the law of Moses, but without fully converting. He remains uncircumcised.

Luke makes it clear that God intends to welcome Cornelius into the restored community without requiring him first to become a Jew. However, this turn of events so surprises Peter that two visions are necessary: one to Peter and another to Cornelius. Together, the two visions convince Peter that he should not consider unclean what God has made clean. As a result, Peter goes to Cornelius's house, coming to realize that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34).

As Peter begins to tell the story of Jesus, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles gathered at Cornelius's house, and they begin speaking in tongues and praising God. The Jewish followers of Christ with Peter are amazed that God has given the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles. Then, Peter asks a question very much like the one the eunuch asked Philip: "Can anyone prevent (*kōluō*) the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47).⁶ Later in Acts, reflecting back on this moment, Peter remembers Jesus's words, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Peter goes on to say, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11.16–17).

In this story, baptism in the Holy Spirit guarantees that God has already accepted these Gentiles, welcoming them into the restored community *as* Gentiles. Because of this acceptance, they also receive water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Whereas baptism by the Holy Spirit follows water baptism in Acts 2, in the scenes in Samaria (Acts 8) and in the scene with Cornelius, it *precedes* water baptism. Perhaps it should go without saying, but God is not bound by a neat formula in the distribution of the Spirit. In addition, as in the story of the

⁶ Translation is my own, drawing out the parallel with the eunuch's question in Acts 8.36.

eunuch, Luke makes it clear that it is the Holy Spirit pushing the envelope and breaking boundaries; humans are simply trying to keep up.

The conversion of Cornelius opens the way for the good news to spread to Jews and Gentiles through the rest of the Mediterranean. Three additional scenes of baptism in the mission of Paul mark this progress in three distinct geographical areas. In Philippi, a city in Macedonia, the Lord opens the heart of a God-fearer named Lydia, a female counterpart to Cornelius, and she and her household receive baptism (Acts 16.15). In the same town, in the face of a divinely empowered earthquake, a jailer asks what he must do to be saved, and he is told to believe. Paul then preaches to him, the jailer binds the wounds of Paul and Silas, and then he and his household are baptized (Acts 16.33). In Corinth, a city in Achaia (roughly modern Greece), many people come to faith in Christ and are baptized (Acts 18.18). In these two stories, Luke does not tell us about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, although presumably it occurred.

The third scene involving baptisms occurs in Ephesus, in the region of Asia (western portion of modern Turkey). It is a bit more complex, because some followers of Christ there know only the baptism of John. Initially, Luke tells us about the eloquent and highly educated man Apollos, who knows the “way of the Lord” and “the things about Jesus” but he understands only the baptism of John. So, Priscilla and Aquilla explain the way [of God] more accurately to him.⁷ Is Apollos then baptized “in the name of Jesus”? Acts does not tell us.

However, a few verses after the story of Apollos, we learn about some other disciples in Ephesus who have received only John’s baptism. Paul informs them that John told “people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus,” and after they hear this, they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19.4–5). When Paul places his hands on them, they receive the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and prophesying like the people at Cornelius’ house (Acts 19.6). Why are these disciples baptized into Jesus’ name, whereas Apollos (as well as the apostles) may not have been? Luke does not make it clear.

Conclusion and Reflections

The book of Acts depicts three different types of baptisms. John’s baptism prepares people to recognize the redemption of God as it arrives through the person of Jesus. But with Jesus’ resurrection, something new happens. The disciples of Christ become immersed in the Holy Spirit, which marks a new, surprising moment: the fulfillment of God’s redemption and a new wide-open, restored community that witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. This redemption gives people in Jerusalem a second chance to recognize Jesus as Messiah, and when they do, they receive water baptism in Jesus’ name. That is, by reorienting toward God they receive a new identity: they are immersed in the name of Christ, in the person of Christ, in whom they experience transformative forgiveness. So, too, they are immersed in the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables them then to witness to Christ and share the good news even to Jews on the margin of God’s people and, most surprisingly, to Gentiles, who in turn also become immersed in Christ and the Spirit. This process then continues throughout the Roman Empire—into Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia—defining the new community not by its members’ history, gender, or ethnicity but by their identity in Christ and experience with the Holy Spirit.

When I was young, the line “Look, here is water” seemed like a simple act to me. Today, I am challenged by the rich and complex portrayal of baptism in Acts, and a key aspect of this challenge is how to live it out. What does the depiction of baptism in Acts mean for us today? I will share three implications.

First, the point made in Acts that John’s baptism still holds sway for some of the characters, along with the varying order of water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism, remind me that in real life—both in the ancient world and today—baptism is not always a neat formula. People have diverse experiences with baptism. The followers of Christ in Acts had to work through these differences, seeking to be loving and faithful, and so do we. As we have seen, the depiction of baptism in Christ in Acts centers on repentance and forgiveness, which in turn generates love and care toward others. This point suggests to me that any attitudes toward baptism grounded

⁷ Luke does not specify the exact gap in Apollos’ knowledge. Perhaps he accurately knows of the life of Jesus but not the resurrection that confirms Jesus as Messiah. Later, Apollos goes to Corinth, where he demonstrates from scripture Jesus’ identity as Messiah. Perhaps this reflects his new understanding.

in arrogance, self-righteousness, or meanness are not biblical perspectives on baptism, while attitudes and actions grounded in love are.

Second, Acts depicts water baptism in the name of Christ as a complete reorientation and total immersion in the forgiveness and person of Christ. Baptism is not just something we do: it represents a new identity that utterly changes us. Our baptism asserts our trust for forgiveness in a historical person who was the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, whose identity God validated by raising him from the dead, and who now reigns from heaven. Baptism, repentance, forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ reminds us that we are “in Christ.” I must confess that at one point in my life, I thought of baptism simply as a surety of salvation. I see it now as a turn into a new path and identity: a door that opens perpetually into the powerful reality of the name of the risen Jesus. In this sense, baptism does not occur at a single moment. Rather, through baptism, we become constantly immersed in Christ, where repentance and forgiveness continue to wash over us, continually transforming us to love others.

Third, Acts closely associates baptism in Christ with immersion in the Holy Spirit, which usually follows but sometimes precedes water baptism. We might ask today: what does the Holy Spirit do in Acts? It brings people together in Christ; it inspires praise of God; it directs the church's mission in unexpected ways; and it confirms the surprising direction taken by God's grace. Today, our baptism means that we are people of the Spirit: open to the missional, community-building, powerful, surprising, and boundary-breaking work of God. Our baptism calls us to open our hearts to people whom we may have marginalized or rejected, and it encourages us to relinquish control, always reminding us that God is directing the story.

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