Bible Controversies — Water Baptism

The controversy surrounding the doctrine of water baptism

Part 2 of 3 — Lessons 10–17 | A Radio Series by Keith Blades | Enjoy the Bible Ministries®

Study Overview & Lesson Summaries

About This Series

These are Lessons 10–17 of Bible Controversies, on the controversy surrounding the doctrine of water baptism — the one with the most varied forms of disagreement and controversy. Keith begins with basic matters: there is more than one kind of baptism spoken about in the Bible, and God's definition of baptism — a washing for purification that results in sanctification and a new identification. He then shows that water baptism pertains to God's program with Israel: one of the rudiments or elements of the world, an Old Testament ordinance, and, with John the Baptist, the first installment in Israel's prescription for cleansing. He closes with two objections: shouldn't we follow the Lord Jesus Christ in baptism, and why do the scriptures show that the Apostle Paul water baptized?

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Lesson Summaries

L10

More Than One Kind of Baptism *Matthew 3:11; Hebrews 6 and 9; I Corinthians 12 and 10: At Least Five Kinds*

The Most Varied Controversy

- Water baptism is “the one with the most varied forms of disagreement and controversy” — not because God is vague or unclear in what he teaches about it
- Improper Bible handling is at the root: failing to rightly divide the word of truth, along with failing to keep verses in context, to let the Bible define its own teachings, and to go by just what the Bible says
- Two basic matters come first: recognizing there is more than one kind of baptism, and knowing God’s definition of baptism — the second is left for next time

Wet, Dry and Hot (Matthew 3:11)

- Matthew 3:11 speaks of three different kinds of baptism in one verse; the context is John the Baptist’s ministry to the nation Israel
- Water baptism was a big issue in John’s ministry, but the two baptisms the Messiah was to administer — “with the Holy Ghost, and *with* fire” — involve no water
- Keith describes them as “one that’s wet, one that’s dry, and one that’s hot”; the baptism with fire would burn up the chaff as part of purging the floor of the nation Israel (verse 12)

The Doctrine of Baptisms (Hebrews 6) and Washings (Hebrews 9)

- “The doctrine of baptisms” (Hebrews 6:2) is plural and a direct reference back to Matthew 3:11; it refers primarily to the three kinds of baptisms Israel in particular needed to be concerned with
- The word “washings” in Hebrews 9:10 literally is the word baptisms; under the law contract and the tabernacle there were different kinds of baptisms, and Leviticus especially speaks of different kinds of water baptisms

By One Spirit Into One Body; Unto Moses

- I Corinthians 12:13 is baptism by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ: a man does not perform it; God the Holy Spirit does
- It is different from being baptized with the Holy Ghost: in Matthew 3:11 the Lord Jesus Christ is the baptizer with the Holy Ghost; in I Corinthians 12:13 the Holy Spirit is the baptizer into Christ
- Being “baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (I Corinthians 10:2) was a national baptism; water was present, but no one of the nation Israel got wet, so strictly speaking it is not a water baptism either

At Least Five Kinds

- These passages identify at least five different kinds of baptism, one of them a water baptism; the other four don’t involve water at all — “And there’s more than this” — so water baptism is not necessarily the most important baptism God speaks about
- Untrue things are said about water baptism from passages about an entirely different kind of baptism; we must not automatically assume water is the issue every time the word baptism appears

L11

God's Definition of Baptism *Hebrews 9; John 3; I Corinthians 10; Galatians 3: Washing, Purification, New Identification*

The Definition

- The 2nd basic matter is God's definition of baptism: "A baptism is a washing for purification that results in sanctification and a new identification."
- The definition holds whether it is a wet baptism or a dry baptism; Keith gives it first, then substantiates it from Hebrews 9 and other passages

A Washing (Hebrews 9:10, 13)

- The word "washings" in Hebrews 9:10 is the fundamental concept of a baptism; Keith defines a baptism first as a washing because that is how it is translated there
- A washing implies the need for cleansing — an uncleanness or defilement — and a baptism is a washing applied to it with the intention of removing it
- "The ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean" refers to the water of separation of Numbers 19, used in the washings the law contract prescribed; it is the unclean that have a baptism applied to them
- The effect of that baptism was to sanctify to the purifying of the flesh; these verses hold the components of the definition of what a baptism is

A Question About Purifying (John 3:22–25)

- The context of John 3:22–23 is water baptism, with the people of Israel responding to the gospel of the kingdom being preached to them
- Some think the subject completely changes at verse 25's question about purifying; that is a mistake — it is the question regarding the baptizing, and the purifying is what the baptism is all about

A New Identification (I Corinthians 10; Galatians 3)

- In Israel's national baptism there was a purifying and a separation or sanctification, when God separated them unto himself from the world in general, from the Egyptians in particular
- This national baptism identified Israel unto Moses, who stood before them "as a type of Christ as their Redeemer and their Deliverer"; coming out of Egypt, they received a new identification in God's eyes
- The moment we trusted the Lord Jesus Christ in this dispensation of grace, God the Holy Spirit baptized us into the body of Christ; baptized into Christ, we have put on Christ and received a new identity in Christ
- Former fleshly distinctions — Jew, Greek, bond, free, male — aren't the issue in Christ; a new identification is the issue in Christ

God's Definition, Not Man's

- Man's descriptions — a testimony of faith, a witness to the world, a sacrament, a confirmation rite, an initiation rite to church membership — don't even use washing, cleansing, purification or sanctification; that's not what God says a baptism is

L12

The Role and Function of Water Baptism *Romans 6; Colossians 2; Hebrews 9: Not Part of God's Program With Us Today*

Baptized Into Jesus Christ (Romans 6)

- Because the word baptism is used in Romans 6, Christians often assume water baptism is meant; but water baptism is not the issue — water isn't even

mentioned in the passage

- The only baptism that could ever get you into Jesus Christ is one God himself performs: the Holy Spirit baptizes an individual into Christ the moment he trusts Christ, giving a position of sanctification and identification with him
- Paul is teaching the doctrine of the identification we receive the moment we trust the Lord Jesus Christ; water baptism doesn't symbolize that

The Operation of God (Colossians 2:10–12)

- Paul reminds the Colossians and us of a complete position in Christ that can't be added to or improved upon by anything we do or by any ceremonies performed by man
- The circumcision and the baptism of Colossians 2:11–12 are ones God performed — not water baptism, but "the operation of God"

Men's Definitions

- When men fail to understand God's definition they concoct their own — a testimony of faith or a witness to the world, ideas you can't find in the Bible; or a sacrament, a confirmation rite, a New Testament ordinance that replaces circumcision

Not Part of God's Program With Us Today

- The role and function of water baptism is "the most important issue of all"; if we do not clearly understand God's use of it, we will find ourselves guilty of misusing it
- Water baptism pertains to God's program with Israel; when God suspended that program and brought in the dispensation of his grace for us Gentiles, its role and function was suspended also
- Christians who practice water baptism today, however sincere, do so in ignorance of the dispensational change; God wanted Israel's zeal based on sound knowledge (Romans 10:2), and the same applies with us

Three Things About Its Role and Function

- Three things show water baptism really has no function in this dispensation of Gentile grace — 1st, it is one of the many rudiments or elements of the world contained in the law that God used with Israel
- 2nd, it had a specified, limited usefulness for as long as the law covenant was in effect; 3rd, it was one of the three kinds of baptisms that made up the prescription for Israel's cleansing
- Hebrews 9 makes plain that water baptisms are a natural part of the law, the first covenant: they're washings — that's what a baptism is — and the water baptisms were physical washings; Leviticus 11–17 describes at least five different kinds of water baptisms
- Water baptisms fall into the category of "carnal ordinances" — part of the law, part of the Old Testament system

L13

Water Baptism a Rudiment of the World *Galatians 4; Colossians 2: Little Children in Time Past, Adult Sons Today*

Misused in This Dispensation of Grace

- As astounding as it may sound, water baptism is misused in this dispensation of grace: it is part of God's program and dealings with Israel, but not part of his program with us today
- Christians end up taking the law ceremony of water baptism God used in his

program with Israel and apply it to themselves today

- Moses, John the Baptist and the twelve apostles could never have made the statement Paul makes in I Corinthians 1; Paul declares only one baptism for today, the baptism by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (Ephesians 4)

Water Baptisms and the Law Go Together

- Water baptisms were one of the many carnal ordinances, as Hebrews 9 refers to them, and a very big part of God's dealings with Israel under the law
- The law and water baptisms go together; since we're "not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14), water baptisms aren't going to be part of God's program and dealings with us today

Children in Time Past, Sons Today (Galatians 4)

- A rudiment or element of the world is "a physical, observable teaching aid" used to teach a child, especially a little child, a spiritual reality
- In time past God dealt with Israel as little children, employing the law, the Old Testament system, with its rudiments or elements of the world; today he is treating us as sons, adult sons
- By his death on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ made it so God the Father could start dealing with his people as adult sons — simply teaching us the doctrine of the spiritual realities we became possessors of the moment we trusted Christ

Rudiments in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2

- Besides observing "days, and months, and times, and years" (Galatians 4:10), physical circumcision and water baptisms are part of the rudiments of the world
- The Galatians, taught that we're not under the law but under grace, desired to be back under the law system, putting themselves in bondage to the elements of the world and operating on Israel's calendar
- In Christ we have the real circumcision and the real baptism of God that physical circumcision and water baptisms were only a shadow of; in Colossians 2:11–12 Paul is not talking about a need for either

Dead With Christ From the Rudiments

- "Dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world" (Colossians 2:20) means dead from the need to practice any ordinance, including water baptism; there is no need to deal with shadows when we possess the substance and the reality
- Water baptism being a rudiment of the world in itself tells us it has no role or function with us in this dispensation of grace — and this is only the 1st of the three issues

L14

Water Baptism an Old Testament Ordinance *Hebrews 9:1–15: Imposed Until the Time of Reformation*

A Specified, Limited Usefulness

- Water baptisms served a purpose only as long as the Old Testament system was in effect; once the New Testament or New Covenant was established and understood, the carnal ordinances, including water baptisms, would no longer be used
- This is really another aspect of what has been seen already, but Keith deals with the ordinance issue separately because of a serious error often made

about water baptism

Not a New Testament Ordinance

- Christians are commonly taught there are two ordinances under the New Testament; that may be what theologians say, but it is not what the Bible says — we go by exactly what God says
- The serious error is calling water baptism a New Testament ordinance, which leads people to think it has a natural role with us because we operate on the basis of the New Testament
- There is the New Testament, but there are no such things as New Testament ordinances; ordinances belong to the Old Testament system, and water baptism is an Old Testament ordinance
- The Lord's Supper is a memorial celebration of the significance of Christ's death; Paul's explanation in I Corinthians 11 shows it is not an ordinance

Ordinances and the Old Testament System (Hebrews 9)

- Hebrews 9 describes the first covenant, the Old Testament system, using the expression ordinances; ordinances were a big feature of it, as in Leviticus 18:4
- "Meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances" (Hebrews 9:10) are all part of the Old Testament ordinance system; the washings refer to the various kinds of baptisms, the various water baptisms set forth in it
- No one should ever call water baptism a New Testament ordinance: "Never has been, never will be."

Until the Time of Reformation

- These were "imposed *on them* until the time of reformation" (Hebrews 9:10): God didn't intend those things to have limitless use or to be used forever
- When a reformation takes place, things are reformed and you are expected to think differently; the time of reformation is the establishment of the New Covenant through Christ's death, burial and resurrection, and the reforming of our thinking by its doctrine
- Once the time of reformation is in effect, Old Testament ordinances are done away, including the Old Testament ordinances of water baptisms
- Keith says that "even though we live in this dispensation of God's grace for us Gentiles," God deals with us today on the basis of that new covenant; Paul, a minister of the New Testament (II Corinthians 3), acts in accordance with the reformation doctrines

L15

John the Baptist and His Baptism *Matthew 3 and 11; Ezekiel 36; Exodus 19 and 29: Israel's Prescription for Cleansing*

No Controversy Needed

- There shouldn't be any controversy about when water baptism should be done or who is a candidate for it, because Christians shouldn't be practicing it in the first place; to do so today is out of line with God's program
- Water baptism was a common practice in God's program with Israel — and not only common, but natural in view of how God was dealing with Israel

The Gospel Accounts and Israel's Program

- The Gospel accounts, along with Genesis through Malachi and even the opening chapters of the book of Acts, pertain to God's time-past dealings with the nation Israel

- In his earthly ministry the Lord Jesus Christ ministers to the people of Israel, “a minister of the circumcision” (Romans 15:8); this dispensation of Gentile grace came in only when God raised up Paul as a brand new apostle (Acts 9)
- Romans to Philemon, Paul’s epistles, set forth God’s program and his instructions for us today in the dispensation of grace

The Prophet of the Climactic Stage

- John is considered the greatest prophet in Israel because of his special ministry: with this prophet the issue would be that the time had come for the kingdom to be established in Israel
- John was the signifier that the climactic stage in God’s program with Israel had arrived — God’s purpose being to establish the kingdom of heaven on this earth, vested in the nation Israel

Israel’s Prescription for Cleansing (Matthew 3; Ezekiel 36)

- John administered a water baptism while preaching to the nation Israel to repent, for the kingdom of heaven was at hand; he is called the Baptist because of it
- John’s baptism is the 1st of three baptisms to be administered to Israel during the climactic stage; the Messiah would perform the other two, with the Holy Ghost and with fire — together, Israel’s prescription for cleansing to make them ready for the kingdom
- The paths were not straight in Israel: Israel was in an unclean state, likened to a “generation of vipers,” unclean creatures in God’s program with Israel
- The initial installment of the prescription for cleansing is a water baptism — John’s is the fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:25; when all three come to pass, the nation is cleansed and fit to function in the kingdom

A Kingdom of Priests (Exodus 19 and 29)

- In the kingdom Israel is designed to function as a nation of priests (Exodus 19:5–6); in a priest’s consecration the first thing is to be washed with water — a water baptism, an initiation rite consecrating him to function as a priest
- Believing Israelites who received John’s baptism were at the same time participating in the initiation rite of the kingdom of priests; all water baptisms are part of God’s program with Israel, none of his program with us today

L16

Why the Lord Jesus Christ Was Water Baptized *The 1st Objection Answered: Luke 2 and 3; John 1; Matthew 3; Isaiah 42*

God’s Understanding of Water Baptism

- God has given us liberty from all those weak and beggarly elements, including water baptism; a big stumbling block is that Christians don’t have God’s understanding of it
- God says water baptism is a carnal ordinance and a rudiment of the world, and through Paul that in this dispensation of grace all the rudiments of the world are weak and beggarly things

Two Common Objections

- 1st, shouldn’t we follow the Lord Jesus Christ in baptism? 2nd, if water baptism has no place in this dispensation of grace, why do the scriptures show that Paul water baptized?
- The logic of the 1st: since the Lord Jesus Christ was water baptized, we ought to be water baptized

The Logic Tested (Luke 2)

- Christ submitted to other things besides water baptism: eight days after his birth he was physically circumcised, and he was presented to the Lord at Jerusalem after the days of Mary's purification
- By that logic you've got to submit to physical circumcision as well; most Christians recognize those things belong to the Old Testament system and God's program with Israel, but think water baptism is an exception
- That Christ was baptized is not a good enough reason for anyone in this dispensation of grace to do likewise

Why the Jews Were Baptized (Luke 3; Ezekiel 36)

- Christ was not water baptized for the same reason the other Jews were; of the three baptisms in the prescription for cleansing, the 1st was a water baptism administered by the voice crying in the wilderness, John the Baptist
- The Jews hearing John needed to repent — change their mind about themselves; God had declared Israel filthy in his sight; Christ was not part of the generation of vipers, not unclean, not an idolater

Made Manifest to Israel (John 1; Matthew 3; Isaiah 42)

- John was told the Spirit descending and remaining on the one he baptized would manifest him to Israel as the Christ who baptizes with the Holy Ghost — the next installment in the prescription for cleansing
- Christ was baptized of John "to be made manifest to Israel that he is the Christ" — to identify him as the Messiah to Israel; John understood the Lord did not need water baptism for the same reason the rest of the Jews did
- At Christ's baptism the very thing in Isaiah 42:1 is seen, "I have put my spirit upon him"; no one, not even in Israel's program, could ever follow Christ in that baptism, so the 1st objection carries no weight at all

L17

Why Paul Water Baptized Some *Romans 6; Ephesians 4; Colossians 2; I Corinthians 1: The One Baptism Today*

Not Sent to Water Baptize

- When God revealed this dispensation of grace unto Paul and commissioned him to proclaim it, he didn't send Paul out to water baptize; the twelve apostles were all commissioned to water baptize, because it was a big issue in God's program with Israel
- Today the only baptism God is concerned with is the one he himself performs when someone trusts the Lord Jesus Christ: the baptism by the Holy Spirit, putting the believer into Christ — not a carnal ordinance, not a rudiment of the world

The One Baptism in Paul's Epistles

- In Romans 6 Paul is not talking about water baptism at all; the Holy Spirit's baptism has made us dead to sin and alive unto God, and sanctifies us to live unto God as we await the Lord's return
- The Holy Spirit's baptism has put us collectively as Christians together into Christ (I Corinthians 12:12–13) and given us a new identity in Christ — baptized into Christ, we have put on Christ (Galatians 3:26–28)
- "A baptism is a purification unto sanctification and a new identification"; of the many baptisms in God's word, only the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5 has meaning and significance in this dispensation of grace

Dead With Christ From the Rudiments (Colossians 2)

- Paul raises the baptism that is "the operation of God," the one he himself performs, in Colossians in the context of a warning
- Like the circumcision made with hands, water baptism has nothing to do with us in this dispensation of grace; being dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world includes circumcision, meats, drinks, holy days — and also water baptism

Why Paul Baptized Some (I Corinthians 1)

- Paul water baptized some, such as the household of Stephanas, but obviously not everyone; the Corinthians misunderstood why he baptized the few that he did
- Water baptism is not part of the gospel God wants preached in this dispensation; since Paul was not sent to baptize yet baptized a few, he did it for a very special but very restricted reason — one that no longer exists
- Paul says "the Jews require a sign" (I Corinthians 1:22) in the context of water baptism and the gospel; Paul used water baptism as a sign to the Jews, in connection with testifying to them that Christ had come

While Israel Was Diminishing

- The Pharisees who came to John's baptism knew no one would be water baptized in the name of Christ unless Christ had come; there was no need to baptize all — Paul did so especially where Jews outside the land could be influenced
- Paul did other things because of the Jews — circumcising Timothy (Acts 16), shaving his head and taking a vow (Acts 18); that ministry to Israel outside the land lasted only as long as Israel was diminishing (Romans 11)
- Paul water baptized some to function as a sign to unbelieving Israel that the Christ had come, at the beginning of his ministry as the nation of Israel was diminishing

Key Doctrinal Distinctions

More Than One Kind of Baptism

Matthew 3:11 speaks of three different kinds of baptism in one verse; the Messiah was going to administer two, and neither one of them involves water. Keith identifies at least five different kinds of baptism, one of which is a water baptism; the other four don't involve water at all, and there's more than this. Water baptism is not necessarily the most important baptism God speaks about in the Bible.

With the Holy Ghost vs. By One Spirit into One Body

In Matthew 3:11 the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the baptizer with the Holy Ghost; in I Corinthians 12:13 it is the Holy Spirit Himself who is the baptizer into Christ. Christians often confuse the two, but they are two different baptisms.

God's Definition vs. Man's

Wet or dry, no matter what kind of baptism it is, a baptism is a washing or a cleansing for purification that results in sanctification and a new identification. People describe baptism as a testimony of faith, a witness to the world, a sacrament, a confirmation rite or an initiation rite to church membership; Keith says that's not what God says a baptism is.

An Old Testament Ordinance, Not a New Testament One

Ordinances belong to the Old Testament system; water baptism is an ordinance, but an Old Testament ordinance, and there are no such things as New Testament ordinances. Water baptisms had a specified, limited usefulness, "imposed *on them* until the time of reformation"; once that time of reformation is in effect, Old Testament ordinances are done away, including water baptisms.

Israel's Program vs. This Dispensation

Water baptism was a big issue in God's program and dealings with Israel, but not in this dispensation. In time past God treated Israel as little children, employing the law with its rudiments or elements of the world; He is treating us today as sons, adult sons. We are dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world — dead from the need to practice any ordinance, including water baptism.

Why Christ Was Baptized; Why Paul Baptized Some

The Lord Jesus Christ was not water baptized for the same reason sinning Jews were water baptized; He was baptized to be made manifest to Israel, and no one could ever follow Him in that baptism. When God commissioned Paul He didn't send him out to water baptize; Paul water baptized some, for a very special but very restricted reason, as a sign to unbelieving Israel that the Christ had come.

Key Scripture References

Exodus 29:1–4	The first thing done in consecrating a priest is a water baptism
Leviticus 11–17	At least five different kinds of water baptisms
Isaiah 42:1	Jehovah's servant, God the Father's elect: "I have put my spirit upon him"
Ezekiel 36:24–28	Israel's prescription for cleansing; John's water baptism fulfils verse 25
Matthew 3:11–12	Three kinds of baptism in one verse: with water, with the Holy Ghost, and with fire
Matthew 3:13–17	Christ's baptism: the manifestation of Christ to Israel
Luke 2:21–24	Christ circumcised and presented at Jerusalem — part of the Old Testament system
John 1:31–34	"that he should be made manifest to Israel"

John 3:22–25	The question about purifying is the question regarding the baptizing
Romans 6:3–4	Baptized into Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, not into water
I Corinthians 1:12–17	“Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel”
I Corinthians 1:22	“the Jews require a sign” — Paul used water baptism as a sign to the Jews
I Corinthians 10:1–2	A national baptism unto Moses; no one got wet; a new identification
I Corinthians 12:12–13	Baptism by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ
Galatians 3:27–28	Baptized into Christ, we “have put on Christ” — a new identity
Galatians 4:1–11	Dealt with as children in time past; as sons today
Ephesians 4:4–6	“one baptism” — the one the Holy Spirit performs
Colossians 2:11–12	A circumcision God performed; a baptism that is “the operation of God”
Colossians 2:20	“dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world”
Hebrews 6:1–2	“the doctrine of baptisms” — plural
Hebrews 9:9–10	“divers washings” — water baptisms among the ordinances of the Old Testament system