

# **Apostolic Baptism and the Unified Pattern of Christian Initiation**

*A Grammatical-Historical Exegesis of the New Testament Baptismal Texts  
and an Examination of the Reordering of Salvation*

An Academic Paper

by

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*Methodological commitment: grammatical-historical exegesis anchored in the Greek text,  
explicit New Testament usage, narrative sequence, and covenantal logic,  
with patristic evidence functioning as a historical control.*

## Abstract

This study argues that the New Testament presents a single, coherent apostolic pattern of Christian initiation in which baptism functions as the God-appointed, faith-governed point of covenant entry. Read on their own grammatical and contextual terms, the principal baptismal texts—Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:1–11; Galatians 3:26–27; Colossians 2:11–12; Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 1 Peter 3:21; and John 3:5—consistently associate baptism with the remission of sins, the washing away of sins, union with the crucified and risen Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, regeneration, and incorporation into the one body. Ephesians 4:5 gathers this into the confession of “one baptism,” which a bifurcated initiation scheme fractures. The paper proceeds by grammatical-historical method: it foregrounds the Greek syntax (the telic force of εἰς ἄφεσιν, the middle voice of ἀπολουσαι, the instrumental διά + genitive of Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12, and the disputed ἐπερώτημα of 1 Peter 3:21), allows the recurring narrative sequence of Acts to carry theological weight, and treats systematic frameworks as servants of the text rather than as a grid imposed upon it. It then engages the Reformed *ordo salutis*—especially regeneration prior to faith—as the chief reordering that requires the baptismal texts to be reclassified, and tests that reordering against the explicit order of John 20:31, Romans 10:17, and the conversion narratives. Finally, the patristic witness is consulted as a historical control, where it corroborates the stronger reading of the apostolic texts. The cumulative claim is methodological as much as material: where a system can preserve the baptismal passages only by softening their grammar, the burden of proof rests on the system, and the text must govern.

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## 1. Introduction: The Question, the Thesis, and the Method

Few practices of the early church are described in stronger terms than baptism, and few have been more thoroughly redefined. Peter commands it for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38); Ananias commands Saul to be baptized and wash away his sins (Acts 22:16); Paul says believers were baptized into Christ and into his death (Rom 6:3), that those baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal 3:27), and that they were buried and raised with him in baptism through faith in the working of God (Col 2:12); Paul calls salvation a washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5); Peter says baptism now saves (1 Pet 3:21); and Jesus speaks of being born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Yet a large portion of contemporary Protestant theology treats baptism as an outward symbol of a salvation already complete before and apart from it. The distance between the apostolic vocabulary and the modern category is the problem this paper addresses.

The thesis is twofold. Materially, the New Testament presents a unified apostolic pattern of Christian initiation—proclamation, hearing, faith, repentance, confession, calling on the Lord, and baptism—in which baptism is the divinely appointed, faith-filled point at which the convert is brought into Christ, cleansed, sealed with the Spirit, and added to the covenant people. Methodologically, this pattern becomes visible only when the texts are read through grammatical-historical exegesis rather than through a prior systematic grid, and it is obscured precisely where a system requires the texts to be reclassified.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 *The Method: Grammatical-Historical Exegesis and the Servant Role of Systems*

A theological system is legitimate and even unavoidable; the question is not whether the interpreter has categories but whether those categories remain submitted to the text. A system is *ministerial* when it follows exegesis and summarizes its results; it becomes *magisterial* when it precedes exegesis and decides in advance what a passage may mean. The methodological commitment of this study is that the burden of proof rests on the grammar of the inspired authors, not on the coherence of a competing dogmatic scheme. When the natural sense of a clause and a system collide, the clause is to be corrected only by another clause, never by the system itself.

Four controls govern the exegesis that follows. First, the Greek text: the aorist imperatives in Acts 2:38, the middle voice in Acts 22:16, the prepositional architecture in Romans 6 and Colossians 2, and the syntax of 1 Peter 3:21 are not ornamental but load-bearing. Second, explicit New Testament usage: a word such as βάπτισμα or ἀπολούω must be defined by how the apostolic authors actually deploy it, not by the function a later tradition needs it to perform. Third, narrative

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<sup>1</sup>On the priority of exegesis over systematic synthesis as a matter of method, see Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), esp. 1–10, on letting the historical and grammatical sense of the text govern theological conclusions. The same ordering—biblical theology built on exegesis, systematic theology built on biblical theology—is defended in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 35–60.

sequence: where Luke repeatedly presents the same order of events at conversion, that order is data, not decoration. Fourth, covenantal logic: the new covenant promise of cleansing and the Spirit (Ezek 36:25–27) supplies the horizon against which the apostolic initiation pattern is to be read.

### ***1.2 The Edenic Pattern of Deception as Hermeneutical Backdrop***

The earliest assault on the word of God in Scripture is not violence but distortion: the serpent questions (ἄληθες ὅτι εἶπεν ὁ θεός, “Has God indeed said?”), Gen 3:1), reclassifies a boundary of life as deprivation, and then outright contradicts the warning (“You will not surely die,” Gen 3:4). Paul reads this as the paradigm of doctrinal danger, fearing that the Corinthians’ minds might be corrupted “as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness” (2 Cor 11:3) and warning of “another Jesus,” “a different spirit,” and “a different gospel” (2 Cor 11:4). The relevance for the present question is structural rather than polemical: distortion typically retains the vocabulary while altering the order and function of what God has said. This is precisely the move this paper will identify when baptism, retained as a word and a rite, is relocated out of the apostolic moment of conversion and reclassified as a sign after the fact.

## **2. Scripture Over System: The Hermeneutical Commitment**

Before the individual texts are examined, the governing commitment must be stated plainly, because it determines what counts as a valid objection. A system has crossed from servant to master when it protects itself from the text. The signs of that inversion are recognizable: a plain command is reclassified as a symbol; a stated condition is downgraded to mere evidence; a warning addressed to believers is reassigned to hypothetical or false professors; an apostolic example, repeated and theologically interpreted, is dismissed as “merely descriptive”; a word is quietly redefined; or the sequence of salvation is rearranged so that passages must be read against their own grammatical order.

None of this entails anti-theology or biblicism without synthesis. The New Testament itself models synthesis: Paul reasons from the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and Jude appeals to a body of truth delivered once for all, “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, τῆ ἅπαξ παραδοθείση τοῖς ἀγίοις πίστει). The point is the *direction of correction*: when Scripture and system disagree, the system yields. The Berean commendation (Acts 17:11) establishes the principle at its limit—if even apostolic preaching was rightly examined against the Scriptures, no later confession is exempt from the same examination.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>On παραθήκη / the deposit and the obligation to guard rather than revise the apostolic teaching (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:13–14), see the discussion of the pastoral-epistle language in standard treatments; the canonical and historical control this provides against doctrinal novelty is the substance of the so-called Vincentian principle, here used only as a corollary of Jude 3 and not as an independent authority.

### 3. The Apostolic Pattern in Acts: Proclamation and Response

Acts is Luke’s inspired record of the apostolic mission and the natural place to test any claimed order of salvation, as it shows sinners being told how to respond to the proclaimed gospel. Two texts carry the exegetical weight—Acts 2:38 and 22:16—and a recurring conversion sequence reinforces them.

#### 3.1 Acts 2:38—*Repentance, Baptism, and the Telic Force of εἰς ἄφεσιν*

After Peter’s Pentecost sermon climaxes with the declaration that God has made the crucified Jesus “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36), the convicted crowd asks, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (2:37). Peter responds:

*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)*

The Greek is Μετανοήσατε, [φησίν,] καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν, καὶ λήμψεσθε τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. Two grammatical features are decisive.

First, the construction joins two imperatives—μετανοήσατε (aorist active, second person plural) and βαπτισθήτω (aorist passive, third person singular)—and attaches a single purpose phrase, εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν. The shift from plural to singular individualizes the command (“every one of you”) but does not sever baptism from the goal; the most natural reading is that both repentance and baptism are directed toward the forgiveness of sins.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the preposition εἰς. The principal evasion of this verse reads εἰς ἄφεσιν causally—“be baptized *because of* the remission of sins already received.” But the causal use of εἰς with the accusative is, at best, marginal and disputed in Koine, whereas its telic (purpose) and resultative force is pervasive; the burden of proof rests squarely with the causal reading.<sup>4</sup>

The intratextual controls settle the matter. The identical pairing of repentance and remission of sins appears in the risen Lord’s commission: “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Acts 2 marks that beginning at Jerusalem; Peter is executing the commission, not inverting it. The parallel in Acts 3:19—“Repent therefore and be converted, *that* your sins may be blotted out” (εἰς τὸ ἐξαλειφθῆναι

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<sup>3</sup>That the number shift (plural μετανοήσατε, singular βαπτισθήτω) distributes the command to each individual rather than detaching baptism from the purpose clause is recognized across the commentary tradition; see F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), on Acts 2:38; and the extended grammatical discussion in Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1989), ch. on Acts 2:38.

<sup>4</sup>On the directional/telic force of εἰς and the weakness of the proposed causal sense in Acts 2:38, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 369–71, who, while himself favoring a non-instrumental reading on theological grounds, concedes that the causal-εἰς proposal (associated with J. R. Mantey) is grammatically tenuous and not the natural sense. The decisive control, however, is intratextual usage (below), not the lexicon alone.

ὕμῶν τὰς ἁμαρτίας)—uses an unambiguously telic εἰς + articular infinitive: turning is for the purpose of having sins blotted out, not because they have already been blotted out. Acts 22:16 also connects baptism with the washing away of sins. The Lukan usage is consistent; the causal reading is required only by a prior commitment that forgiveness must precede baptism.

Finally, the promised gift of the Spirit (τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) ties the verse to the new covenant promise in Ezekiel 36:25–27—clean water, a new heart, the indwelling Spirit, and obedience—so that Acts 2:38 is not an isolated baptismal proof-text but the inaugural enactment of entry into the new covenant. The objection that this makes baptism a meritorious work is answered not by softening the grammar but by the texts themselves, which locate the saving power in the name of Christ, the resurrection, and the mercy of God (§4.3–4.4 below).

### 3.2 Acts 22:16—*The Middle Voice and the Washing Away of Sins*

Saul of Tarsus has seen the risen Christ, has called him “Lord,” has obeyed the command to enter the city, and has spent three days in prayer and fasting (Acts 9:4–11). After all this, Ananias, sent by the Lord, says:

*And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord. (Acts 22:16)*

The Greek is ἀναστὰς βάπτισαι καὶ ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου ἐπικαλεσάμενος τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. Three syntactic observations bear on the doctrine.

First, βάπτισαι and ἀπόλουσαι are aorist *middle* imperatives. The causative-permissive middle (“get yourself baptized,” “have your sins washed away”) is well attested and fits the context: Saul does not cleanse himself by his own agency, yet he is the one summoned to undergo the act through which cleansing is received.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the two imperatives are coordinated, and the washing is grammatically tied to the baptism: “be baptized *and* wash away your sins.” Luke does not write “be baptized to symbolize sins already washed away.” The text places the washing at the baptism, not before it. That Saul had already encountered Christ and confessed him as Lord does not cancel this; on the contrary, it demolishes the assumption that a genuine prior faith makes baptism merely declarative, for here genuine prior faith leads *into* a baptism still described as the locus of washing.

Third, the aorist participle ἐπικαλεσάμενος (“calling on”) is contemporaneous with the main verbs: the calling on the name of the Lord occurs within the baptism, not as an alternative to it. This is the decisive harmonization of Acts 22:16 with Romans 10:13 (“whoever calls on the name

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<sup>5</sup>On the permissive/causative middle in Acts 22:16 (“let yourself be baptized; get your sins washed away”), see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 426–27; cf. BDAG, s.v. ἀπολοῦω. The middle preserves both Saul’s responsibility to respond and the divine agency of the cleansing.

of the Lord shall be saved”): the calling and the baptism are not rivals; the baptism is the appointed act in which the appeal of faith is made.<sup>6</sup>

Acts 22:16 therefore agrees with Acts 2:38 in form and substance: remission in the one (ἄφεσις) and washing away in the other (ἀπολούω), each joined to baptism in the name of the Lord. A reading that separates baptism from forgiveness in Acts 2 is, for consistency, forced to separate baptism from washing in Acts 22—at which point the system is no longer explaining the text but correcting it.

### ***3.3 The Recurring Conversion Sequence as Theology***

The objection that narrative is “merely descriptive” cannot be applied indiscriminately. When a practice is repeated, theologically interpreted, and explicitly commanded, its normative force is part of the inspired record. Luke presents a strikingly consistent order: the word is proclaimed, received in faith, and the hearers are baptized—the Samaritans (Acts 8:12), the Ethiopian (8:35–38), Cornelius’s household, whom Peter commands to be baptized (10:48), Lydia (16:15), the Philippian jailer baptized “the same hour of the night” (16:33), and the Corinthians who “hearing, believed and were baptized” (18:8). The urgency is uniform; baptism is the immediate response to the gospel, not a deferred symbol.<sup>7</sup>

The Pentecost summary makes the corporate dimension explicit: “those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” (Acts 2:41), after which they “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (2:42). The verbs ἐβαπτίσθησαν (“were baptized”) and προσετέθησαν (“were added”) place baptism at the threshold of incorporation into the visible people of God. Initiation in Acts is thus not a private, interior transaction but a public, covenantal entry.

## **4. The Pauline Theology of Baptismal Union**

Where Luke records the apostolic command, Paul supplies its Christological depth. The Pauline texts do not present baptism as a human work competing with faith or as a mere sign; they present it as the act in which faith receives the working of God who unites the believer to the death and resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>6</sup>On the adverbial (temporal/manner) function of the aorist participle ἐπικαλεσάμενος as coincident with the imperatives, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 624–30 (on the participle of attendant circumstance and contemporaneous aorist participles); the calling on the name is thus an aspect of the baptismal event, not a separable, prior transaction.

<sup>7</sup>On the immediacy and integral place of baptism in the Lukan conversion accounts, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962; repr. Paternoster, 1972), 100–112; and Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study*, on the Acts conversion narratives. The cumulative pattern is the point: the apostles command and administer baptism as the act in which the gospel is obeyed.

#### 4.1 Romans 6:1–11—Baptized into His Death, Buried, Raised

Paul’s ethical argument against continuing in sin rests on baptism. “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Rom 6:3). The interrogative ἢ ἀγνοεῖτε (“or do you not know?”) presupposes shared apostolic catechesis; baptism’s meaning is assumed knowledge, not novel teaching. The phrase ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν—baptized *into* Christ—is union language; the believer is transferred from outside Christ to inside Christ, into the saving significance of his death.

Verse 4 makes the strongest single statement: συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον—“we were buried with him through baptism into death.” The preposition διὰ + genitive (διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος) is instrumental: baptism is the means by which the burial-with-Christ is effected, not merely a picture appended to it.<sup>8</sup>

The inferential οὖν (“therefore”) shows that Paul’s entire exhortation depends on the baptismal reality: *because* we were buried with Christ through baptism, we are to walk in newness of life. Were baptism only a sign of a union already complete elsewhere, the argument would be indirect; as it stands, it is direct—ethical obligation flows from the baptismal participation Paul describes. The εἰς phrases (εἰς Χριστόν, εἰς τὸν θάνατον) and the συν- compounds (συνετάφημεν, σύμφυτοι in v. 5, συνεσταυρώθη in v. 6) together constitute the vocabulary of real participation, not analogy.

#### 4.2 Galatians 3:26–27—Faith and Baptism Are Not Opposed

Galatians is often invoked to set faith against baptism; the text does the opposite. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ). For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε)” (Gal 3:26–27). The explanatory γὰρ of v. 27 grounds the sonship-through-faith of v. 26 in baptism into Christ; Paul moves from faith to baptism without any sense of tension, because, for him, the one is expressed in the other.<sup>9</sup>

The aorist ἐνεδύσασθε (“you put on,” from ἐνδύω, to clothe) is initiatory identity language: to be baptized into Christ is to be clothed with Christ. The result—“there is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28)—is the dissolution of Old Covenant boundary markers

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<sup>8</sup>On the instrumental διὰ + genitive in Rom 6:4 (“through baptism” as the means of being buried with Christ), see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 368–69, 434–35; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:301–4, on Rom 6:3–4; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 359–67; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 305–15. While these interpreters differ on the precise relation of sign and thing signified, the instrumental syntax of διὰ is not in dispute.

<sup>9</sup>On the γὰρ of Gal 3:27 grounding v. 26, and on ἐνεδύσασθε (“put on/clothed with Christ”) as initiatory, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 154–57; and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 185–87. The clothing metaphor (ἐνδύω) denotes a change of identity effected at the threshold, not a subsequent badge.

within a New Covenant identity, the very category of covenant entry. Faith is the means; baptism is the act; Christ is the sphere.

### ***4.3 Colossians 2:11–12—The Verse That Settles the Charge of Merit***

Colossians 2:11–12 is exegetically pivotal because it brings together baptism, circumcision of Christ, burial, resurrection, and faith in a single sentence. “In Him you were also circumcised... buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” The operative phrase is *διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ*—“through faith in the working of God.”<sup>10</sup>

This single clause excludes both errors at once. It refutes any charge of works-righteousness because the raising is “through faith in the working of *God*”: the believer does not raise himself; God raises him, and faith is directed toward God’s power, not toward the rite or the agent. It also refutes symbol-only reduction because the believer is said to be buried and raised *with Christ in baptism* (ἐν ᾧ, “in which”), not merely depicted as such. Colossians 2:12 is therefore the controlling text for the “is baptism a work?” objection: Paul places baptismal burial-and-resurrection squarely on the side of grace received by faith, exactly where Titus 3:5 places the washing of regeneration.

### ***4.4 Titus 3:5—The Washing of Regeneration on the Side of Mercy***

Titus 3:4–5 makes the grace-grammar explicit: “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” (ἔσωσεν ἡμᾶς διὰ λουτροῦ παλιγγενεσίας καὶ ἀνακαινώσεως πνεύματος ἁγίου). In one sentence, Paul denies works-righteousness (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων) and affirms a saving washing (λουτρόν). The decisive point is classification: Paul does not place the washing in the category of works that compete with grace; he places it under *mercy*.<sup>11</sup>

The noun λουτρόν denotes a bath or washing, and its only other New Testament occurrence (Eph 5:26, “the washing of water by the word”) is likewise baptismal. The pairing of “washing of regeneration” with “renewing of the Holy Spirit” echoes the Ezekiel 36 pattern of cleansing-and-Spirit. The verse thus dismantles the assumption underlying much of the reordering it confronts—that assigning any saving function to baptism necessarily implies merit. Paul shows that grace can save *through* an appointed washing without ceasing to be grace.

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<sup>10</sup>On Col 2:11–12, the syntactical relation of συνταφέντες / συνηγέρθητε and the objective genitive τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ (“faith in the working of God”), see Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC 44 (Waco: Word, 1982), 116–22; and James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), on 2:11–12.

<sup>11</sup>On λουτρόν παλιγγενεσίας (“washing of regeneration”) and the baptismal reference of Titus 3:5, see BDAG, s.v. λουτρόν, παλιγγενεσία; George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 338–45; and the survey in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, who notes the near-unanimous early reading of the verse as baptismal. Λουτρόν denotes a bath/washing rather than mere ablution, reinforcing the connection to the baptismal act.

#### 4.5 1 Corinthians 12:13—Incorporation into the One Body

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἓν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν, 1 Cor 12:13). Two readings of ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι are possible—the Spirit as the agent (“by one Spirit”) or as the sphere/element (“in one Spirit”)—but on either construal the verse ties baptism to incorporation into the one body, εἰς ἓν σῶμα.<sup>12</sup>

This text is often cited to posit a purely spiritual “baptism of the Spirit” set over against water baptism. But the proper distinction is redemptive-historical rather than ordinary: the language of being baptized *in* or *by* the Spirit into the body belongs to the inaugural outpouring through the exalted Christ, while the ordinary apostolic pattern of initiation—faith, repentance, and water baptism in the name of Jesus—remains the sole point of covenant entry. To fracture this into two parallel initiations is precisely what Ephesians 4:5 forbids (§6).

### 5. The Petrine Witness: 1 Peter 3:21 and the Appeal of a Good Conscience

Peter’s statement is the boldest and the most carefully qualified in the New Testament. After speaking of Noah’s household saved through water, he writes: “There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (ὁ καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀντίτυπον νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα)—not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God (συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21).

The grammar is unambiguous in the main clause: the relative ὃ (“which”) has water as its antecedent; ἀντίτυπον identifies baptism as the antitype of the flood waters; and the present indicative σώζει (“now saves”) directly predicates salvation of baptism. Peter then guards the statement against two misunderstandings. Negatively, baptism does not save as σαρκὸς ἀπόθεσις ῥύπου (“removal of the filth of the flesh”)—it is not a magical ablution. Positively, it saves as συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν, and ultimately δι’ ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”).

The crux is ἐπερώτημα. The term ranges from “request/appeal” to “pledge” (as in a formal question-and-answer at the conclusion of a contract). On the “appeal” reading, baptism saves as the appeal of a good conscience *to* God for cleansing; on the “pledge” reading, as the pledge of a good conscience *toward* God. Either way, the saving efficacy is not in the water but in the Godward appeal of faith, answered through Christ’s resurrection.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>On the syntax of ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι in 1 Cor 12:13 (instrumental “by” vs. locative “in”) and against the supposition of two unrelated “baptisms,” see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 996–1000; and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 603–9. The verse coordinates Spirit and baptismal incorporation rather than dividing them.

<sup>13</sup>On ἐπερώτημα in 1 Pet 3:21 (“appeal/request” vs. “pledge/answer”), see BDAG, s.v. ἐπερώτημα; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49 (Waco: Word, 1988), 216–18; and Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 260–62, who argues for “appeal to

The verse thus exemplifies the apostolic balance. It rejects reduction to symbol (“now saves”) and elevation to magic (“not the removal of the filth”). A doctrine that can repeat Peter’s qualification (“not the removal of the filth of the flesh”) but cannot repeat Peter’s affirmation (“baptism... now saves us”) has retained half the sentence and silenced the other half.

## 6. The Johannine Anchor: Born of Water and the Spirit (John 3:5)

To Nicodemus, Jesus says, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit (ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος), he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The single preposition ἔξ governs both nouns (ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος), and the absence of a repeated article most naturally yields a single, complex birth—“of water-and-Spirit”—rather than two separate births.<sup>14</sup>

The Ezekiel 36:25–27 background is decisive: “I will sprinkle clean water on you... I will put My Spirit within you.” Jesus reproves Nicodemus for not knowing this as “the teacher of Israel” (3:10), which presupposes an Old Testament referent—precisely the cleansing-water-and-Spirit promise of the prophets. The verse therefore coheres with Titus 3:5 (washing of regeneration and renewing of the Spirit) and Acts 2:38 (baptism for remission and the gift of the Spirit): water and Spirit together constitute entry into the New Covenant. Read in this canonical frame, John 3:5 is the Johannine anchor of the unified initiation pattern, not an isolated metaphor to be stripped of its baptismal resonance.

## 7. Ephesians 4:5 and the “One Baptism”

Paul grounds the church’s unity in seven objective realities: “one body and one Spirit... one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4–6). The structure is a confessional list of unities, and “one baptism” (ἓν βάπτισμα) stands alongside “one Lord” and “one faith.” Its placement is significant: baptism is not a denominational accessory but a constituent of the church’s apostolic foundation.<sup>15</sup>

The exegetical force of Ephesians 4:5 against a bifurcated initiation is structural. If the New Testament had taught two distinct, parallel initiations—a saving “baptism of the Spirit” that constitutes union with Christ and a separate water baptism that merely symbolizes it—then the

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God” and stresses that the resurrection, not the water, is the ground of salvation. The qualification “not the removal of the filth of the flesh” guards precisely against the mechanical-ritual misunderstanding, not against efficacy as such.

<sup>14</sup>On the single ἔξ governing both ὕδατος and πνεύματος (one birth, not two) and the new-covenant background of Ezek 36:25–27 (water + Spirit), see Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 226–32; cf. the Granville-Sharp-related discussion of the shared preposition and anarthrous nouns in Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 270–90 (on article and substantive coordination). The Ezekiel allusion controls the imagery: cleansing water and the indwelling Spirit are the twin promises of new-covenant regeneration.

<sup>15</sup>On the seven “ones” of Eph 4:4–6 as a unity confession and on ἓν βάπτισμα belonging to the same series as “one Lord, one faith,” see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 237–40; and Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 514–20. Most commentators take the “one baptism” as Christian water baptism, the rite of initiation, precisely because it is paired with the unity markers of Lord and faith.

natural confession would be of *two* baptisms, not one. The unity formula resists exactly this division. The singular ἓν βάπτισμα, set beside the singular Lord and the singular faith, points to a single complex of initiation in which faith, the name of Christ, the washing of water, and the gift of the Spirit are aspects of one entry, not two competing rites.

This does not reduce every New Testament use of “baptism” to a single referent. The language of Christ’s sovereign baptism in the Spirit (Acts 1:5; 11:16) belongs to the redemptive-historical inauguration—Pentecost and its analogues—whereas the ordinary, repeated, commanded initiation of converts is the one baptism of Ephesians 4:5. The distinction is between an inaugural epochal act and the standing pattern of initiation, not between two permanent parallel sacraments. A two-baptism model that makes the spiritual reality routinely precede and exist independently of the commanded rite fractures the “one baptism” the apostle confesses.

## **8. Baptism as Covenant Entry and Priestly Consecration**

The cumulative force of the texts above is best captured by the category of covenant entry, when read through the three horizons of biblical theology—textual, epochal, and canonical.<sup>16</sup>

### ***8.1 Covenant Thresholds and the New Covenant Promise***

Throughout Scripture, God marks his people at covenant thresholds and through signs: circumcision for Abraham’s offspring, the exodus and sea-crossing for Israel, and priestly washings that admitted to holy service. These were not empty gestures but divinely appointed acts that marked cleansing, separation, and belonging. The new covenant does not abolish covenant entry; it transforms and fulfills it in Christ, so that entry into the people of God is now entry into Christ. The controlling promise is Ezekiel 36:25–27—clean water, a new heart, the indwelling Spirit, and consequent obedience—which Peter announces as fulfilled at Pentecost and which appears verbatim in the structure of Acts 2:38, Titus 3:5, and John 3:5.

### ***8.2 Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2***

Colossians 2:11–13 explicitly links the Old Covenant sign of entry to the new. “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands... buried with Him in baptism... And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him.” The movement is from death to life, from uncircumcision to inclusion, and from guilt to forgiveness. Paul does not reduce baptism to a one-to-one replacement for circumcision; rather, he presents the “circumcision of Christ”—the decisive putting off of the

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<sup>16</sup>The “three horizons” (textual, epochal, canonical) method for relating a passage to the unfolding covenants is set out in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 109–40; it is adopted here as an exegetical control, not as a systematic grid imposed on the text.

flesh—as realized in the believer’s burial and resurrection with Christ in baptism, through faith in God’s work. Baptism stands at the point of covenant transition.

### ***8.3 Washed, Clothed, Anointed: The Priestly Consecration Pattern***

The Old Testament consecrated priests through a fixed sequence: washing with water, investiture with priestly garments, and anointing with oil (Exod 29:4–7; Lev 8:6–12). The New Testament declares the church a “royal priesthood” and “holy priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5, 9; cf. Exod 19:6) and applies the same triad of consecration, now fulfilled in Christ. The believer is washed—“be baptized, and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16); “you were washed... in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit” (1 Cor 6:11). The believer is clothed—“as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). The believer is anointed by the Spirit—“you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).<sup>17</sup>

This typological pattern is not an allegory imposed on the text but the structural logic through which the New Testament describes entry into the priestly people. It confirms that baptism is a consecration to a vocation, not merely the cancellation of a debt: the washed are clothed with Christ and anointed by his Spirit, set apart for holy service in the body.

## **9. The Reordering of Salvation: A Critical Examination**

The exegetical results above are most systematically resisted not by competing word studies but by a competing order of salvation. The Reformed *ordo salutis* typically runs as follows: unconditional election; effectual call; regeneration, prior to and as the cause of faith; faith; justification; baptism as a sign and seal of grace already given; and the guaranteed perseverance of the truly regenerate. Once that sequence is fixed, the baptismal texts must be relocated: if forgiveness and union precede baptism by rule, then Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6, Galatians 3:27, Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21 must each be read as signs of a reality completed elsewhere.

Stated fairly, the Reformed case is not arbitrary. It rests on a serious doctrine of human inability—sinners are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1, 5)—and holds that the spiritually dead cannot believe unless first made alive; it seeks to protect salvation by grace from any hint of human contribution; and it reads the covenant sign as continuous with circumcision, applied to

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<sup>17</sup>On the typological correspondence between priestly washing/clothing/anointing (Exod 29; Lev 8) and Christian initiation, and on the church as the fulfilled royal-priestly people (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Exod 19:6), see the priestly-consecration discussion in the project monograph material; for the wider biblical-theological development of priesthood from Eden through the new covenant, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, on the Adamic and Israelite priestly vocation.

believers (and, in the paedobaptist stream, to their children) as a seal of the righteousness that is by faith.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these concerns has a biblical starting point; the question is whether the inferred *order* arises from the text or is imposed upon it. Three lines of evidence indicate the latter.

### ***9.1 The Stated Order: Believing unto Life, Not Life unto Believing***

John’s purpose statement explicitly fixes the order: “these are written that you may believe... and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31, ἵνα πιστεύ[σ]ητε... καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε). The ἵνα clauses run from believing to life, not from life to believing. The Johannine idiom is consistent—“he who believes in the Son has everlasting life” (John 3:36); “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live” (John 5:25)—in which hearing the proclaimed word precedes life. None of this denies divine initiative, the Spirit’s drawing, or the priority of grace; it denies that regeneration is exegetically established as a discrete act *temporally prior to and independent of* faith. The death metaphor in Ephesians 2 describes the sinner’s condition and need; it does not, by itself, establish the *ordo*, which must be demonstrated from the text rather than deduced from the metaphor.

### ***9.2 The Apostolic Mechanism: Faith Comes by Hearing***

Paul explains the origin of faith: “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom 10:17, ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀκοὴ διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ). In Romans 10:14–17, Paul outlines a sequence of sending, preaching, hearing, believing, and calling. He does not insert a prior regeneration as the cause that makes faith inevitable; he locates faith’s coming in the heard word. The Reformed reading must supply that hidden step; the text does not.

### ***9.3 The Narrative Test: Acts Does Not Preach Regeneration Before Faith***

If regeneration-before-faith were the controlling apostolic doctrine, Acts—the record of apostolic preaching—would display it. It does not. Repeatedly, the order is proclamation, hearing, believing, repenting, being baptized, and receiving the promise (Acts 2:37–41; 8:12, 35–38; 16:31–33; 18:8). The apostles never tell inquirers to wait for evidence of prior regeneration; they preach Christ and command a response. The result is a methodological dilemma for the reordering: the visible apostolic order is no longer the actual order of salvation, and a system-generated sequence is preferred to Luke’s narrated one. Where the apostles did not preach the order, the church should hesitate to make it the controlling grid.

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<sup>18</sup>For a careful contemporary statement of the believer’s-baptism Reformed position and its covenantal logic, see Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 97–161; and Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*. The present critique engages this position on its strongest exegetical terms and concerns the ordering of regeneration and faith and the function of baptism, not the sincerity or scholarship of its proponents.

#### **9.4 The Category Error: Baptism Misclassified as a Work**

The reordering often defends itself by classifying baptism as a “work” that must therefore be excluded from the moment of salvation. But the texts classify it otherwise. Titus 3:5 places the washing on the side of mercy, not works (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων... ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ αὐτοῦ ἔλεος); Colossians 2:12 says the believer is raised “through faith in the working of God”; and 1 Peter 3:21 says baptism saves “not the removal of the filth of the flesh” but as an appeal to God “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Baptism is consistently presented as the passive reception of God’s working through faith—grammatically, the believer is *baptized* (passive) and *raised* (passive) by God. To call this a meritorious work is to assign it a category Scripture withholds.

The conclusion is restrained yet firm. The Reformed concern to honor grace and divine initiative is right; its reordering of regeneration before faith and its consequent relocation of baptism are not established by the texts and require the clearest baptismal passages to be read against their grammar. Under the method adopted here, that is the signature of a system functioning magisterially rather than ministerially.

### **10. The Reclassification of Biblical Words**

The mechanism by which the texts are neutralized deserves explicit description because it operates beneath the level of overt denial. Doctrinal distortion typically retains biblical vocabulary while altering its function: the word remains, but its apostolic role is reassigned. A command becomes “only a symbol”; a stated condition becomes “only evidence”; a warning becomes “only hypothetical”; an apostolic example becomes “only descriptive”; βάπτισμα is retained but stripped of remission, washing, union, and regeneration; πίστις is retained but severed from the obedient response the apostles include in it; χάρις is retained but redefined against the very means God appoints.

The interpretive discipline that exposes this is the distinction between a word’s *definition* and its *function*. An interpreter may define baptism correctly in the abstract (immersion, washing) yet deny every function Scripture assigns to it; that is not a lexical error but a functional one. The diagnostic question is therefore not “does the doctrine use biblical words?” but “does it use them as the inspired authors use them?” If a doctrine can survive only by repeatedly inserting “merely symbolizes” at points where the apostles write “for,” “into,” “wash away,” and “now saves,” reclassification has occurred, and the burden of proof returns to the system.

### **11. The Early Christian Witness as Historical Control**

Scripture is the authority; the early church is a witness, not a judge. Yet the patristic evidence serves as a historical control for a specific question: did the Christians nearest the apostles understand baptism as a bare outward symbol after salvation was complete, or as the appointed

washing of forgiveness, regeneration, and new-covenant entry? If the symbol-only reading were the original apostolic teaching, it would have to explain why the post-apostolic church almost immediately and almost universally read the baptismal texts in the stronger sense.

The data consistently run against symbol-only initiation. The Didache treats baptism as the normal, expected threshold of Christian life (Did. 7).<sup>19</sup>

Justin Martyr (mid-second century) describes converts being brought to the water for new birth, remission, and illumination, language that echoes John 3:5 and Acts 2:38.<sup>20</sup>

Irenaeus (late second century), whose burden was continuity with the apostolic rule of faith against Gnostic distortion, speaks of baptism in connection with regeneration and incorporation into the church's faith; Tertullian devotes an entire treatise, *On Baptism*, to its connection with washing, forgiveness, and salvation, while taking its seriousness and preparation seriously.<sup>21</sup>

Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) expounds baptism in his *Mystagogical Catecheses* as real participation in Christ's death and resurrection, drawing on Romans 6, and Augustine, despite elements of his later system that require independent testing, defends baptismal regeneration as the mainstream inheritance rather than an innovation.<sup>22</sup>

The conclusion is measured. The fathers were neither inspired nor uniformly reliable, and later developments—mechanical sacramentalism, ecclesial control, and disputes over rebaptism and infant baptism—must be tested by Scripture rather than assumed. But on the central question, the earliest witness stands much closer to the natural sense of Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, John 3:5, Romans 6, Titus 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21 than to modern symbol-only theology. The symbol-only reading is the historical outlier; the burden of proof it carries is real.<sup>23</sup>

## 12. Conclusion: Let the Grammar Govern

The New Testament does not present baptism as a detached emblem appended to a salvation otherwise complete. It presents one apostolic pattern of initiation: the gospel is proclaimed; faith

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<sup>19</sup>Didache 7, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, LCL 24–25 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); cf. the analysis of the Didache's baptismal instructions in Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 201–18.

<sup>20</sup>Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); discussed in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 236–46, who notes Justin's connection of baptism with regeneration (παλλαγενεσία) and illumination (φωτισμός).

<sup>21</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (e.g., 1.21.1; 3.17.1), in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1; Tertullian, *On Baptism*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885). See Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 308–79, for the second- and third-century witness.

<sup>22</sup>Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 2, on Rom 6 and baptismal participation; for Augustine's defense of baptismal regeneration as received doctrine, see Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 776–816. The point is historical, not authoritative: baptismal regeneration antedates medieval sacramental development by centuries.

<sup>23</sup>Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, surveys the first five centuries and concludes that the association of baptism with regeneration and remission is early and pervasive; the historical-outlier status of the symbol-only view is a corollary of that survey, not a claim that patristic consensus settles doctrine.

comes by hearing; the convicted sinner repents, confesses Christ, and calls on the Lord; and in baptism—received by faith in the working of God—the believer is brought into Christ, sins are washed away, the believer is sealed with the promised Spirit, and the believer is added to the covenant people. Acts commands it; Paul grounds his ethics and soteriology in it; Peter says it saves; John anchors it in the new birth of water and Spirit; and Ephesians 4:5 confesses it as one.

The argument has been as much about method as about conclusions. The baptismal texts are not obscure; they become difficult only when a prior system requires them to mean less than they say. The telic εἰς of Acts 2:38, the middle voice of Acts 22:16, the instrumental διὰ of Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12, the “now saves” of 1 Peter 3:21, and the single ἐξ of John 3:5 are the data; the reordering of regeneration before faith and the reclassification of baptism as a sign-only work are the system’s requirements. Where the two collide, sound method corrects the system by the text, not the other way around.

Two boundaries frame the conclusion and protect it from caricature. Baptism is not magic: it saves not by removing the filth of the flesh but by the appeal of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And baptism is not merit: the believer is baptized and raised by God, through faith in his working, according to his mercy, not by works of righteousness. Between the Scylla of sacramental superstition and the Charybdis of symbol-only reduction lies the apostolic doctrine itself—grace received through the appointed means, by faith, in the name of the Lord. The text must govern; the system must yield.

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