

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

In 1:10–12 Paul confronted the divisions (σχίσματα schismata) at Corinth: “I am of Paul,” “I am of Apollos,” “I am of Cephas,” “I am of Christ.” In 1:13–17 he presses on the logic beneath those slogans, and in doing so he tells us, in his own words, how he ranks baptism against the gospel he was sent to preach. This short paragraph is a hinge. It closes the rebuke about factions and opens the great section on the cross versus human wisdom (1:18ff).

Keep our method in view. We do not build doctrine from the narrative of Acts; we confirm it in the Epistles. Here, in a letter written to the Body of Christ, Paul himself weighs baptism and the gospel. Our task is to let him speak, define his terms, and follow his emphasis rather than our tradition.

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“Is Christ divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.”

Verse 13: Three Questions

“Is Christ divided?” — **μερίζω merizō**, “to divide, apportion, parcel out.” The force is: “Has Christ been divided into shares?” The factions are treating the one Christ as if He could be split into party allotments, a piece for Paul’s group and a piece for Apollos’s.

Three rhetorical questions follow, each framed to expect the answer “No.” The middle one is the anchor: “*was Paul crucified for you?*” The ground of belonging is the cross, not the person who administered a rite.

“In the name of Paul” — **εἰς τὸ ὄνομα eis to onoma**, literally “into the name.” The phrase denotes ownership and allegiance; to be baptized into someone’s name is to be marked as belonging to him (an open follower). The Corinthians had turned baptism into an enrollment badge under a favorite teacher. Paul’s reply is that baptism binds you to the One crucified for you, never to the man who happened to baptize you.

Verses 14–16: “I Thank God I Baptized None of You Except...”

This is a startling thing for an apostle to say. Paul is *glad* he personally baptized almost no one at Corinth. That sentence is unthinkable if water baptism were essential to salvation or the center of his commission. He can only speak this way because baptism is not the point he was sent to make.

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- **Crispus** — almost certainly the Crispus of Acts 18:8, the ruler of the synagogue (ἄρχισυνάγωγος) who “believed in the Lord with all his household.” A Jew, and a leading one. His Latin name proves nothing, since Diaspora Jews routinely bore Greek and Latin names.
- **Gaius** — probably the host of Romans 16:23, “host to me and to the whole church.” A man of means; ethnicity unstated.
- **The household of Stephanas** — “the firstfruits of Achaia” (16:15). A Greek name; no synagogue tie is recorded.

Of the people Paul says he *personally* baptized, only Crispus is demonstrably a Jew; the others we cannot place ethnically. Paul’s own baptizing appears to have clustered in the synagogue orbit (Jews and God-fearers already living inside a ritual-immersion worldview) and to have fallen on the foundational or leading believers or workers on behalf of the mission. But we should not overstate it into “Jews only.” Acts 18:8 adds that “many of the Corinthians... believed and were baptized,” a wider group baptized by his coworkers, and the Pauline mission elsewhere immersed clear Gentiles such as Lydia and the Philippian jailer. The right distinction is between *who was baptized in the mission* and *whom Paul personally baptized*, which was few.

The memory correction is telling: “beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.” A man for whom baptism was the crux would remember exactly whom he baptized. Paul does not, because it was never the crux.

Verse 17: The Thesis, Sent to Preach and Not to Baptize

“οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλén με Χριστὸς βαπτίζειν ἀλλὰ εὐαγγελίζεσθαι” — “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”

“Sent” is ἀποστέλλω *apostellō*, to commission, the root of the word “apostle.” Paul’s commissioned task is εὐαγγελίζω *euangelizō*, to announce the good news. Baptizing is expressly *not* what he was sent to do. This is not “baptism is wrong.” It is “baptism is not my commission, and not the gospel.” Paul draws the line himself. If water baptism were part of the gospel, or necessary to it as an ordinance, this sentence could not be written.

The clause that follows pivots into the rest of the chapter: “not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.” “Made void” is κενόω *kenoō*, to empty, to drain of power. Anything that displaces the cross, whether party loyalty, rhetorical polish, or a baptism worn as a badge, empties it. Paul, in his letter, subordinates baptism to the cross.

DEFINITION: WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism — βαπτίζω *baptizō*, from βάπτω *baptō*, "to dip." The core meaning is to immerse, submerge, or place into, with the resulting sense of *identification*: the thing baptized is joined to, and takes on the character of, that into which it is placed. Classical writers used it of a sunken ship, of dyeing cloth (immersed into dye, the cloth is identified with its new color), even of a man "immersed" in debt or grief. Water is one possible medium; it is not part of the word's meaning. Baptism answers the question *into what?* — and the element, if any, must be supplied by the context.

The New Testament uses the word for several distinct baptisms. They should not be collapsed into one:

- **Ceremonial washings** — the ritual immersions of Judaism (Hebrews 6:2; 9:10, βαπτισμοῖς *baptismois*, "various washings"; cf. Mark 7:4). Wet. The background from which John's baptism arose.
- **John's baptism** — a baptism of repentance preparing Israel for her Messiah (Matthew 3:11; Acts 19:4). Wet, and expressly preparatory, pointing past itself.
- **The baptism of Jesus by John** — to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:13–15), identifying the sinless One with the believing remnant. Wet.
- **Christ's baptism of suffering** — "I have a baptism to undergo" (Luke 12:50; Mark 10:38). His immersion into death at the cross. Dry.
- **Baptism into Moses** — "all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:2). Identification with Moses as leader; the ones who stayed dry were the baptized.
- **The baptism with fire** — judgment (Matthew 3:11–12). Dry.
- **Kingdom water baptism** — in Acts, "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:38), tied to the message to Israel; the rite of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). Wet.
- **The baptism of the Holy Spirit** — the Spirit placing the believer into the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Performed by God, not by human hands. Dry. This is the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5, and the baptism "into His death" of Romans 6:3–4 and Colossians 2:12.
- **Baptism for the dead** — mentioned but not explained (1 Corinthians 15:29); Paul argues from it without endorsing it.

The lesson that emerges from the list itself: most of the baptisms in the New Testament involve no water at all. The word tells you *identification*; only the context can tell you the element. One rule of reading should govern us whenever we meet the word: never assume a baptism is wet unless the

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text says so. The word itself means immersion and identification. Israel was baptized into Moses dry-shod; Christ was baptized into death; the Spirit baptizes us into the Body without a drop of water. Where Scripture means water, it says water. Where it does not, we must not pour it in.

IS BAPTISM A FUNCTION OF THE GOSPEL?

Drawing verses 13–17 together with the wider testimony of the Epistles:

- Paul distinguishes his commission (the gospel) from baptizing (v17). Baptism is not a component of the gospel he was sent to preach.
- He is glad he personally baptized few (v14). Water baptism is not the church's main emphasis; the cross is.
- When Paul defines the gospel outright in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4, there is no baptism in it: "Christ died for our sins... was buried... was raised." Compare Ephesians 2:8–9, grace through faith and not works.
- The baptism that actually defines the church is the Spirit's placing of the believer into the Body of Christ: "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). This, and not a water rite, is the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5 (cf. Colossians 2:12, "raised with Him through faith").

WATER BAPTISM WANES ACROSS ACTS

Trace the trajectory. In early Acts (chs. 2, 8, 10, 18–19) water baptism is prominent, tied to the message to Israel and to believers committed to the mission of the Apostles, an act rooted in Jewish ritual immersion (the mikvah) and in John's baptism of preparation. As the mystery of the Body of Christ is unfolded through Paul, water recedes. By 1 Corinthians 1 Paul minimizes his own baptizing; in the later in Ephesians 4 Paul mentions that there is "one baptism," which we understand as the Spirit's work of incorporation. The rite is not so much abolished as fulfilled, its preparatory purpose spent.

IS WATER BAPTISM AN ORDINANCE OF THE CHURCH?

An ordinance, in the ordinary sense, is a rite formally instituted for the church and commanded to be perpetuated. The traditional position names two such ordinances, the Lord's Supper and water baptism, and grounds baptism in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19. Our position is that water baptism does not meet that standard for the Body of Christ.

Three observations carry the weight. First, the Great Commission was spoken to the eleven in a setting still framed by the kingdom and the nation of Israel, before the mystery of the one Body was made known through Paul. Second, Paul, the apostle to the church, never institutes water baptism, never commands its ongoing practice, and in this very passage sets it apart from his

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commission (1:17). Third, the practice visibly wanes across Acts and the Epistles rather than being established as a fixed rite. A standing ordinance of the church would be commanded, and it would grow in weight through the church's foundational documents. Water baptism does neither.

What the church does hold as constitutive is the one baptism of the Spirit, by which the believer is placed into the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:5). That baptism is not administered by human hands, and it is never optional. It is the reality that the water only ever pictured.

This is not a rejection of water baptism. It was practiced by the apostles, it is not a bad thing, and no believer's water baptism should be treated with contempt. The point is understanding, not prohibition. Water baptism is permitted but not commanded, of value as a personal testimony but not required for entrance into the Body, and it is not a rite the church is bound to perpetuate. We are free regarding it precisely because Christ did not send us to baptize but to preach the gospel.

THE LINCHPIN: ACTS 19:1-7, JOHN'S BAPTISM COMPLETED AND NOT REPEATED

At Ephesus Paul finds about twelve "disciples" and asks whether they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They had not so much as heard of the Spirit. He asks, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answer, "Into John's baptism."

Paul explains that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, directing people to believe in the One coming after him, Jesus. Then verse 5: "when they heard this, they were baptized **into the name of the Lord Jesus**" (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα εἰς τὸ ὄνομα), and in verse 6 Paul laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came.

The reading we take is this. John's water baptism was *preparation*. Being "baptized into the name of Jesus" is the *completion* of that preparation. It is identification with, and belonging to, Jesus, culminating in the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of hands, and not a second trip into the water. The contrast Paul draws is between John's rite (water, preparatory, pointing beyond itself) and the reality it always pointed to (Jesus, and the Spirit). The same phrase, "into the name," that carried the sense of allegiance back in 1:13 carries it here: these men are transferred from John's preparatory hope into full belonging to Christ.

In honesty, many read verse 5 as a second, Christian *water* baptism, and the grammar allows it. But John's baptism was, by John's own words, always preparatory and always pointed past itself. A reading of completion rather than repetition fits that logic, and it coheres with Paul's later minimizing of water and with the "one baptism" being the Spirit's. We name the alternative, and we let the passage's own logic weigh it.

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CONCLUSION

Baptism means to immerse or identify; the question is always, into what? In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul confronts a church that had made baptism a party badge, and he answers by pointing away from the water and the baptizer to the cross and the One crucified for them. He was sent to preach the gospel, not to baptize. The baptism that makes us the church is the Spirit's, placing us into the one Body.