

**The Biblical Validity of Water Baptism: A Scriptural Review and Faith-Theological Evaluation**

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**Abstract**

Water baptism remains one of the most universally recognised Christian practices yet differently interpreted. The purpose of this study is to examine the biblical validity of water baptism. Using the King James Version (KJV) as the scriptural base, the study critically analyses passages such as Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:38, John 3:5, Romans 6:3–5, and 1 Peter 3:21, demonstrating that water baptism is biblically instituted and ecclesially significant, yet not salvific in itself. The paper adopts a sola scriptura methodology that integrates scriptural review, theological analysis, and a faith-theological evaluation grounded explicitly in divine revelation as the primary authority for Christian belief and practice. The study critically evaluates water baptism in relation to salvation, regeneration and the symbolism-reality relationship, ecclesial identity and the Word, discipleship, and the limits of water baptism. The findings reveal that while baptism is divinely commanded and symbolically rich, Scripture consistently attributes regeneration, justification, and sanctification to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than to ritual immersion. The study further argues that water baptism, when interpreted within a Faith-Theological framework, functions as a covenantal symbol that directs attention to the spiritual realities of repentance, faith, and union with Christ, rather than serving as a sacramental mechanism of grace. This paper concludes that water baptism is biblically valid and theologically indispensable as an act of discipleship and public confession, but its power and meaning must be interpreted within the limits established by Scripture and the primacy of the Spirit in the economy of salvation.

**Keywords:** *water baptism, Holy Spirit baptism, scriptural review, faith theology, water baptism by immersion and by sprinkling, theo-theoretical framework.*

**Thesis Statement**

Though this article argues that water baptism is biblically valid as a Christ-instituted ordinance symbolising repentance, faith, union with Christ, and serving as a public sign of Christian discipleship, the economy of God is in Jesus Christ alone and the final arbiter of divine truth is Scripture.

**1.0** **Introduction**

The Christian doctrine of baptism presents a fascinating intersection of biblical foundations, theological interpretation, ecclesial tradition, and practical application. Throughout Christian history, water baptism has been central to debates about salvation, ecclesiology, sacramentality, and the nature of Christian identity. From the earliest days of the Church, believers have been immersed, sprinkled, or poured upon with water as a visible sign of repentance, initiation, and commitment to follow Jesus Christ. Yet the precise meaning of this act continues to provoke discussion and sometimes heated controversy.

Given these longstanding disagreements, the central research problem persists: What does Scripture actually teach concerning water baptism? How should Christians understand its purpose, function, and limitations? Does baptism save? Does it regenerate? Is it merely symbolic? Is it necessary for membership in the Christian community? How is water baptism distinct from the baptism of the Holy Ghost? These are many other questions that are begging for answers. These questions are not merely academic; they affect pastoral ministry, ecclesial practice, evangelistic approaches, and the spiritual lives of believers. At stake is the integrity of Christian doctrine and practice, particularly when the contemporary Church tends either to elevate baptism beyond its biblical function (as in sacramental regeneration) or to minimise it altogether (as in hyper-spiritualised forms of Christianity that see baptism as optional).

In pursuit of clarity, this study employs a rigorous Sola Scriptura methodology that elevates Scripture above tradition, ecclesial pronouncements, or speculative theology. This approach aligns with the biblical exhortation to “seek ye out of the book of the LORD, and read” (Isa 34:16)[[1]](#footnote-1) and Paul’s assertion that Scripture is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). This research also draws upon the distinctive lens of Faith Theology, which emphasises divine revelation as the primary means of theological knowledge. Faith Theology insists that doctrine is not merely constructed from empirical observation, ecclesial praxis, or historical development but from the revelatory truth communicated by God in Scripture. Therefore, this study approaches water baptism not only as a doctrinal issue but as a spiritually discerned reality (1 Cor 2:14).

Through systematic exegesis, theological analysis, a detailed scriptural review, faith-theological evaluation, this paper seeks to demonstrate that water baptism is biblically valid, spiritually beneficial, ecclesially essential, and theologically rich—yet always subordinate to, dependent upon the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and faith in the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ precedes water baptism. The study also critically evaluates water baptism in relation to salvation, regeneration and the symbolism-reality relationship, ecclesial identity and the Word, discipleship, and the limits of water baptism. It is revealed in this paper that the economy of God is in Jesus Christ alone – *Sola Christus*, that is, Christ alone is the Saviour, the only Mediator between God and man in the plan of God (Matt 1:21; Lk.2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23; Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20; 1Tim 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; 2Tim 1:10; Titus 1:3, 4; 2:10,13; 3:4, 6; 2Peter 1:11: 2: 20; 3:2,18; 1John 4:14; 1:25. The epistemic position of the author in this study is that Scripture is the ultimate arbiter of divine truth, against which all theological claims, ecclesial traditions, and experiences must be tested (Isa 34:16; John 5:39; Acts 17:11; 1 Tim 3:16).

**2.0 Scriptural Review**

The validity of water baptism can only be established from the scriptural frame of reference. This is because Scripture remains the epistemic source of divine truth and the final arbiter of divine truth, particularly within Christian theology. Thus, to ensure exegetical depth, this Scriptural Review section covers significantly the full range of biblical material related to washing, purification, baptism, Spirit renewal, discipleship, and ecclesial identity. The concepts of water baptism are fully exegeted from both the Old Testament and New Testament books to give a graphic understanding of the term.

**2.1 Old Testament Foundations of Ritual Washing and Purification**

Although Christian baptism emerges in the New Testament, its conceptual foundations lie deep within the Old Testament. The Old Testament provides a rich tapestry of symbolic, ritual, and theological motifs connected to purification, cleansing, covenant identity, and divine calling.

**2.1.1 Washings in the Mosaic Law**

The Mosaic Law contains numerous prescriptions for ceremonial washings, known in Hebrew as mikveh (Lev 11–15; Num 19:17–19). These washings symbolised purification from defilement, whether caused by bodily discharges, contact with corpses, or ritual impurity. For example, Priests were required to wash before entering the tabernacle (Exod 30:18–21); Levitical purification involved immersion in flowing water (Lev 14:5–8); the ashes of a red heifer mixed with water formed a purification rite for the defiled (Num 19:9–13). These rites symbolised moral and covenantal purity, prefiguring the deeper spiritual cleansing promised by the prophets.

**2.1.2 Prophetic Imagery of Cleansing**

The prophets extend the concept of ritual washing into the realm of spiritual transformation. Example can be found in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel states: “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean… A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you” (Ezek 36:25–26). Similarly, Isaiah links cleansing with repentance: “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings” (Isa 1:16). These texts anticipate the New Testament theme of internal regeneration, which water baptism symbolises but does not accomplish.

**2.1.3 The Priestly and Messianic Context**

The washing of priests before ministry anticipates the believer’s identification with Christ, our high priest (Heb 4:14–16). Furthermore, Zechariah proclaims a coming “fountain opened… for sin and for uncleanness” (Zech 13:1), pointing ultimately to Christ’s atoning work. Thus, the Old Testament provides conceptual categories—washing, cleansing, purification, consecration—that prepare the theological ground for Christian baptism.

**2.2.0 Water Baptism in the Gospels (Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)**

The Gospels present baptism not as an innovation but as the culmination of Old Testament imagery and the inauguration of the Messiah’s ministry. The concept of water baptism according to the Gospel or New Testament is explicitly exegeted in this section.

**2.2.1 John the Baptist’s Ministry and the Baptism of Jesus**

John appears “baptizing in the wilderness, and preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4). His baptism symbolised repentance but did not convey remission itself; repentance was the scriptural condition for forgiveness (cf. Prov 28:13; Acts 3:19). John declares that Christ “shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire” (Matt 3:11), distinguishing water baptism from Spirit baptism. This does not nullify water baptism because Jesus submitted Himself to be baptised not because He is a sinner but because He has to fulfil all righteousness:

13Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. 14 But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? 15And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. 16And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: 17And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (Matthew 3: 13-17)

Jesus submits to baptism “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). His baptism serves multiple functions:

1. Identification with humanity.

2. Inauguration of His public ministry.

3. Validation by the Father (“This is my beloved Son…”).

4. Empowerment by the Spirit.

Notably, Jesus is not baptised for repentance or forgiveness, reinforcing that the act itself does not cleanse sin.

**2.2.2 John’s Baptism and Its Radical Break with Jewish Ritualism**

John the Baptist’s ministry introduces the most dramatic baptismal shift in the biblical canon. His practice is neither a mere continuation of Jewish ritual washings nor a simple purification rite. Instead, it functions as a prophetic, eschatological sign pointing to the promised Messiah. Matthew improves this understanding by interpreting John's ministry as the fulfilment of Isaiah 40:3: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness.” John calls Israel to repentance, just as the prophets summoned them to covenant fidelity. John’s baptism bears the following unique features:

1. Initiatory repentance—Rather than cleansing for ceremonial purity, it signified a moral and covenantal reorientation.
2. Preparation for judgment—John’s message carried an eschatological urgency, warning of the coming wrath (Matt 3:7).
3. Prefiguration of Christian baptism—Although not identical, John’s baptism foreshadows the transition from the Old Covenant to the New.
4. Christological orientation—John’s emphasis on “He that cometh after me” (John 1:27) establishes baptism as ultimately pointing to Christ.

The scriptural presentation highlights that John’s water baptism has validity only in relation to its Christological fulfilment. This point is essential for a Faith-Theological reading: whatever theological weight water baptism carries must be rooted in Christ, not merely in ritual performance (cf. Col 2:17).

**2.2.3 Jesus’ Baptism: Theological Significance and Trinitarian Revelation**

The baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22) carries profound theological implications. While Christ had no sin to repent of (2 Cor 5:21), His water baptism could mean to:

1. Identify with sinners—thus affirming His mediatorial mission.
2. Fulfil all righteousness (Matt 3:15).
3. Publicly inaugurate His ministry—baptism marks the turning point from private to public life.
4. Reveal the Trinity—the Father speaks, the Son is baptised, and the Spirit descends (Matt 3:17).
5. Sanctify Christian baptism—as the second Adam, Christ consecrates the pattern of new covenant discipleship.

The baptism of Christ affirms water baptism as a theologically valid act, yet it demonstrates that baptism’s power is not in the water but in God’s response to the obedient act. A Faith-Theological interpretation sees here the union between divine truth (the command) and human response (obedience).



*The first two pictures on the left side indicate the type of water baptism John the Baptist and the apostles – baptism by immersion – did while the last one on the right side is a child baptism by sprinkling, which is nowhere found in the Bible.*

**2.2.4 Jesus and the Disciples’ Baptising Ministry**

John 4:1–2 clarifies that Jesus Himself did not baptise but His disciples baptised under His authority. This reveals:

1. Delegated authority for baptism.
2. A baptismal movement pre-Pentecost, but still distinct from Christian baptism.
3. Continuity of cleansing symbolism but without the post-resurrection meaning of dying and rising with Christ.

In the Fourth Gospel, water is frequently symbolic of spiritual cleansing (John 2:6; 13:10), pointing towards the deeper experience of regeneration by the Spirit (John 7:37–39).

**2.2.5 The Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20)**

In this Great Commission, Jesus institutionalises Christian baptism. The command links baptism with discipling and teaching, not with salvation:

18And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. 19Go ye therefore, and teach [make disciples] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

**2.2.6 Jesus’ Teaching on Water and Spirit (John 3:5)**

Christ’s statement, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit…” (John 3:5), is best interpreted through Ezekiel 36:25–27, not through ritual baptism. The “water” symbolises spiritual cleansing, and the “Spirit” signifies regeneration. Thus, John 3:5 does not teach baptismal regeneration but spiritual rebirth.

**2.2.7 Water Baptism in the Book of Acts**

Acts presents the fullest picture of water baptism as practised in the early Church. Acts of Apostles also provides the earliest examples of baptismal practice and theological understanding within the apostolic Church. In Acts 2:38 and the Pentecost Baptisms, Peter’s phrase “be baptized… for the remission of sins” must be read in light of Greek syntax, where eis can mean “because of” (cf. Matt 12:41). Repentance is the primary condition; baptism follows as public identification. Acts 8:12–17 discusses the Samaritans. The people believed and were baptised, yet the Spirit does not descend until the apostles lay hands upon them. This explicitly separates water baptism from Spirit impartation.Acts 10:44–48 clearly demonstrates that baptism is not required for salvation because the Spirit of God falls upon Gentiles prior to baptism:

44While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. 45And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. 46For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, 47Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? 48And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.

The Holy Spirit comes before water baptism. Peter concludes: “Can any man forbid water?” implying:

1. Spirit baptism validates them before water baptism.
2. Baptism is an outward recognition of a prior inward work.

Additionally, Pentecost and the establishment of Christian Baptism is another important point to consider. Acts 2:38 forms the first normative Christian baptismal statement: “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.” Peter links baptism with:

* Repentance
* Forgiveness of sins
* Reception of the Holy Spirit

A superficial reading may suggest baptismal regeneration. However, Acts presents multiple conversion sequences (Acts 8; Acts 10; Acts 19), indicating that while baptism is closely associated with salvation, it is not mechanistically linked to it. The Faith-Theological interpretation or reading sees baptism as an act of faith responding to divine truth, not a ritual imparting grace by itself.

Moreover, Samaritan Baptism (Acts 8:12–17) is a relevant prove that water baptism is not equal to baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Samaritans were baptised but did not receive the Spirit until Peter and John laid hands on them. This demonstrates:

1. Water baptism does not automatically convey the Spirit.
2. Apostolic confirmation played a role in early Church unity.
3. This text refutes baptismal regeneration.

More importantly, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is first before anyone could be baptised. This is demonstrated in the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:35–39:

35Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. 36And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? 37And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. 38And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This narrative emphasises:

1. Believe in Jesus Christ
2. The necessity of understanding Scripture before baptism (Acts 8:35).
3. Personal confession of faith (Acts 8:37).
4. Immediate obedience—no ritualistic delay.
5. Water as an available symbol, not a manipulated medium.

It is important to note that Acts 16: 31-34 which speaks of Household baptism does not imply infant baptism:

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. 32And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. 33And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway. 34And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.

This passage emphasises: They “believed” (16:31); they “rejoiced, believing in God with all his house” (16:34). Thus, household baptisms were faith-based, not indiscriminate.

**2.3.0 Water Baptism in the Pauline Epistles**

This section encapsulates Paul’s view about water baptism. In Romans 6:1-11, Paul uses baptism metaphorically to explain death and resurrection with Christ. The water symbolises burial, but the transformation is spiritual. Paul does not attribute saving power to water; rather, faith appropriates union with Christ (cf Gal 3:26–27). In other words, “Baptised into Christ” refers to incorporation. Water signifies the faith-union, not the mechanism of regeneration. Furthermore, Paul, inColossians 2:12, links baptism to faith, not ceremony as believers are buried with Jesus and raised from the dead. Paul unambiguously avers in 1 Corinthians 1:17: “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” Paul’s surprising statement could mean:

1. Baptism is not the gospel.
2. Salvation is not dependent on baptism.
3. Baptism is important but not central to regeneration.
4. Baptism is important but Paul was not called to specialise in it. He was called to preach the gospel.

**2.4.0 Paul’s, Peter’s, and Jesus’ Doctrinal Framework for Understanding Water Baptism**

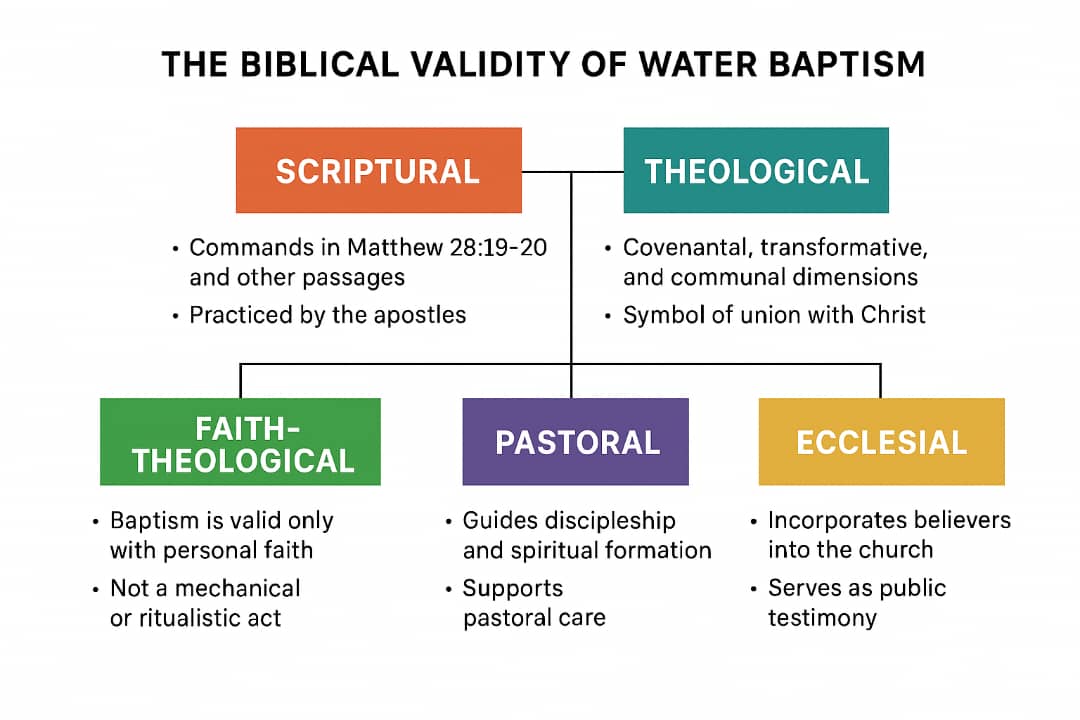
Paul and Peter provide the doctrinal framework for understanding baptism. Paul’s Theology of Baptism reveals that Paul employs baptism metaphorically to illustrate spiritual realities (Rom 6:3–5). He denies any salvific power in baptism (1 Cor 1:17). In the book of Titus 3:5, “washing” is the Spirit’s work, not water immersion. Paul the Apostle shows clearly here the meaning and value of Water Baptism. No doubt, God ordained Water Baptism as an outward sign of an inward work of grace. It can also be regarded as an open confession to all the world that the individual has become a new creature and died to all the past sinful life which is now burying in water as a type of a grave and this outward testimony is usually desired by those who are genuinely converted, but not a means of salvation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Paul asserts:

1What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? 2God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? 3Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? 4Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. 5For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: 6Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin (Rom 6:1-6)

Similarly, in1 Peter 3:21, Peter explicitly states that baptism does not remove sins but symbolises “the answer of a good conscience toward God.”Peter’s view in 1 Peter 3:21 is often misinterpreted. Peter clarifies that “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The Living Bible lucidly puts it this way: “(That, by the way, is what baptism pictures for us: In baptism we show that we have been saved from death and doom by the resurrection of Christ; not because our bodies are washed clean by the water but because in being baptized we are turning to God and asking him to cleanse our hearts from sin.).”[[4]](#footnote-4) Peter therefore denies baptismal regeneration, affirming baptism as faith responding to the resurrection.

It should be noted that only those who are truly saved will follow the step of our Lord Jesus Christ by surrendering themselves for Water Baptism by immersion to fulfil all righteousness. It is not for remission of sins but an outward expression of inward witness.

What is more, to establish the validity of Water Baptism further, Jesus gave an instruction to His disciples after His resurrection how Water Baptism should be conducted or done. He commanded that believers should be baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt 28:19-20).



**3.0 Historical-Theological Review**

**3.1 Baptism in the Early Church (AD 100–300)**

Early Fathers in faith held high views of Baptism but distinguished between water and the Spirit. In the view of **Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus,[[5]](#footnote-5)** Baptism was linked to regeneration, but always through faith and the Spirit’s work. They believed that catechesis[[6]](#footnote-6) (religious instruction) must precede baptism, showing it was faith-informed, not mechanistic. **Tertullian’s** view resists infant Water Baptism. He based his view on the understanding, not on tradition or rituality: “Let them come when they understand” (Tertullian, On Baptism). This shows that Water Baptism three things: (1) water baptism is for believers in Christ, (2) water baptism is not for infants, and (3) faith precedes water baptism. **Cyprian’s** view moves towards sacramentalism, contributing to later medieval views.

In the Medieval period, Water Baptism was institutionalised by the Medieval Church as sacrament, linked it to forgiveness of original sin, established infant baptism as standard, and merged salvation with ecclesial membership. This marks a drift from biblical foundations. But during the Reformation period, Water Baptism was viewed in different ways. For example, **Luther** affirmed a strong sacramental view by saying that baptism conveys grace but only through faith. **Calvin** opined that baptism seals (not causes) regeneration. He concluded that water does not save. **Zwingli** gives a **s**trong symbolic view of baptism as a covenant sign like circumcision. In his view, **Anabaptists** rejected infant baptism entirely.

**4.0 Conceptual Framework**

**4.1 The Meaning, Function, and Limits of Water Baptism**

Water Baptism could mean: (1) Obedience to Christ (Matt 28:19); (2) Identification with Christ (Rom 6:3–4); (3) Public confession of faith (Acts 8:37); (4) Symbol of cleansing (Acts 22:16); (5) Entry into discipleship community (Acts 2:41); Water has symbolic meaning; and the spiritual reality is the Spirit’s work. Water Baptism could also function as: (1) Initiates discipleship; (2) Confirms repentance; 3. Outward sign of inward grace; (4) Public witness; and (5) Church incorporation

On the other hand, New Testament explains further by clearly demonstrating the limits of Water Baptism that: (1) It cannot regenerate (Acts 10:44–48); (2) It cannot impart the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–16); (3) It cannot guarantee salvation (1 Cor 1:17); (4) It cannot cleanse the conscience (1 Pet 3:21); (5) It cannot replace faith (Eph 2:8–9); etc.

**4.2 Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Regeneration and New Birth**

Regeneration (Tit 3:5; John 3:5–8) is the sovereign work of the Spirit, not the effect of water. Jesus emphasises spiritual birth: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). In every New Testament case, Spirit baptism is the cause and water baptism is the sign. In Acts 10:44–48, believers receive the Spirit before water baptism, proving that water is not the mediating cause of regeneration. This aligns with Joel 2:28 and Ezekiel 36:26–27, where the Spirit’s work is internal, divine, and not dependent on external rituals. Though this does not reject the validity and importance of water baptism, it only shows its limits.

**4.3 Doctrine of the Church: Baptism as Entry into Visible Fellowship**

Ecclesiology interprets baptism as the entry rite into the visible Church community (Acts 2:41). Water baptism does not place the believer in the Body of Christ spiritually—that is the Spirit’s work (1 Cor 12:13)—but it places the believer into visible fellowship and covenantal discipleship. Therefore, Spirit baptism is equal to invisible union while water baptism is equal to visible incorporation. In essence, the two should be related, but not conflated.

**4.4 Sacramental Theology: Symbol and Reality**

Water baptism belongs to the category of symbolic ordinances. A symbol is not the reality itself but points to it. Peter clarifies: “Not the putting away of the filth of the flesh” (1 Pet 3:21), affirming symbolic—not magical—function.

**4.5 Christology: The Lordship Basis of Baptism**

The command of Christ in Matthew 28:19 gives baptism its authority. Its validity is in the command, not in inherent power. Baptism is therefore an act of obedience to the risen Lord, not an act that accomplishes salvation.

**5.0 Theo-Theoretical Framework**

The Theo-Theoretical Framework provides the theological architecture upon which the meaning, function, and limits of water baptism can be evaluated. It integrates the doctrines of Scripture, salvation, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and sacramental theology in a structured, analytic manner. It also ensures that conclusions do not arise from isolated proof-texts but from the overall doctrinal system of Scripture. This is consistent with Isaiah’s injunction: “Seek ye out of the book of the LORD, and read” (Isa 34:16). The three theo-theoretical models employed in this work affirm that Scripture is inspired (God-breathed), authoritative, sufficient, infallible, inerrant, and ultimate epistemic source of divine truth, against which all truth claims must be tested. Ilesanmi’s ***Grounded Truth Theory****[[7]](#footnote-7)* is an important theory in this study. The theory has its origin in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 that says "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." To prove a thing pertains to God to establish the truth in His Word. The theory involves test and evaluation to prove the validity of truth claims. This involves examining and assessing all things, including teachings, ideas, and practices, bearing in mind that the authority of Scripture must be established in all matters of faith, doctrine, and practice. The Grounded Truth Theory, though plays a dual role in biblical research, is relevant to this study because this paper is concerned about the validity of water baptism. **The *Sola Scriptura*** as the interpretive theoryis also relevant to this research. A biblical assessment of water baptism must begin with the doctrine of Scripture itself. Sola Scriptura asserts that Scripture is the sole infallible and inerrant authority for faith and practice. The truth claim is certain and tenable. Therefore, baptismal theology must be grounded exclusively in: (1.) Biblical commands, (2.) Biblical patterns, (3.) Biblical theological themes, and (4.) Biblical limits. This means baptism cannot be assigned meanings or powers that the Bible does not attribute to it. Jesus states plainly: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17). Thus, the normative theology of baptism must arise from Scripture’s own internal logic. This approach rejects: sacramental overreach, ritualistic superstition, ecclesial embellishment, and post-biblical sacramentology disconnected from Scripture. Therefore, Sola Scriptura forms the regulating principle that protects baptismal doctrine from theological inflation. Hence the argument in this paper can be seen as being tenable and not presumptuous.

Furthermore, ***faithism*** is another theo-theory that is relevant to this work. The theory states that the epistemic position that faith alone is sufficient for apprehending truth, often without or against the use of human reason, empirical inquiry, or critical reflection. In this case, faith functions as the final arbiter of divine truth. Faithism sees the revealed Word of God – the Bible – as the final arbiter of divine truth without rationalism, empiricism, or critical realism. The theory also asserts that salvation is by faith alone – sola fide. Therefore, water baptism must be interpreted through the biblical doctrine of salvation. Salvation is: By grace (Eph 2:8), through faith (Rom 5:1), in Christ alone (Acts 4:12), and not of works (Eph 2:9). This is because water baptism is a work performed by human hands—performed to the believer, by the Church, using physical water—it cannot serve as the instrumental cause of salvation. Paul distinguishes sharply between faith and ritual: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us” (Tit 3:5). Thus, any assertion that baptism itself regenerates makes the act a salvific work, contradicting apostolic doctrine. One needs faith to believe in the Word of God. We do not need to force our ideas on the scripture.

**6.0 Faith-Theological Evaluation**

This section evaluates water baptism within the epistemological and methodological horizons of Faith Theology. Faith is a non-empirical method for understanding divine truth. Faith Theology, as averred by Ilesanmi, emphasises knowledge by revelation rather than empirical means. It is believed to be a legitimate or an appropriate mode of theological inquiry for understanding divine truth both abstracted and concreted divine realities.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The faith-theological evaluation examines water baptism not merely at the literary, historical, or doctrinal level but at the deeper epistemic level where divine truth is appropriated through faith and recognised as a revealed reality grounded in Scripture. Faith Theology presupposes that divine truth is spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14), that Scripture is the final authority for discerning this truth (Isa 34:16), and that theological conclusions must arise from the correlation between divine revelation, the believer’s epistemic posture of faith, and the Spirit's internal illumination (Ps 119:130). Water baptism, therefore, must be evaluated through the lens of how Scripture presents it—not as ecclesiastical tradition, not as sacramental metaphysics, but as a faith-based act whose meaning, function, and limits are revealed in the Word of God. Thus, this section critically evaluates water baptism in relation to (1) salvation, (2) regeneration and the symbolism-reality relationship (3) ecclesial identity and the Word, (4) discipleship, and (5) the limits of water baptism. Thus, Faith Theology argues that divine truth is:

* Received by revelation,
* Understood by faith,
* Expressed in obedience,
* Tested by Scripture, and
* Applied in practice.

Water baptism must therefore be understood through:

* Faith’s reception of divine truth
* Faith’s obedience to Christ’s command
* Faith’s understanding of symbolic acts
* Faith’s refusal to rely on ritual for salvation
* Faith’s recognition of the Spirit’s primacy in regeneration

**6.1.1 Water Baptism and Salvation: A Faith-Theological Clarification**

Many traditions conflate water baptism with salvation itself. Rome held that baptism causes regeneration ex opere operato (by the work worked). Some Anglican and Lutheran strands adopted a moderated form. Certain contemporary Pentecostal groups insist that baptism in water is part of the salvation formula. However the divergent views on Water Baptism, a faith-theological reading insists on the following foundations:

**1. Salvation is by faith alone**. Paul states emphatically that, “For by grace are ye saved through faith… not of works” (Eph 2:8–9). Thus, faith is the fulcrum upon which our salvation revolves. Water baptism is an act, and therefore cannot be essential to salvation without contradicting Paul’s argument. Faith Theology therefore maintains that salvation is grounded solely in believing the gospel:

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed (Rom 10:9–11)

John similarly asserts:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16-18)

The fulcrum of argument here is that salvation is by ‘Faith’ alone, nothing is added. Hence, Jesus says: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:15-16; cf John 3:18; 5:24).

**2. Scripture consistently places faith before baptism.** In every narrative pattern, faith precedes water baptism. Thus, if one is not saved, one is not even qualified for water baptism. Water baptism is not a mode of salvation but an outward expression of inward believe in the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Scriptural examples abound: The Ethiopian believed before being baptised (Acts 8:36–38); Cornelius’ household received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit before Water Baptism (Acts 10:44–47); and the Philippian jailer believed and then was baptised (Acts 16:30–33). Faith precedes the sign; the sign does not create faith.

**3. Water baptism is not the instrument of regeneration.** Regeneration is produced by the Spirit through the Word of God: “Being born again… by the word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). Jesus teaches new birth as a spiritual work independent of ritual: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Thus, water baptism only symbolises salvation but does not cause it.

Faith theology concludes that water baptism is a response to salvation, not a requirement for salvation. It is an act of obedience grounded in prior faith, an outward demonstration of inward regeneration.

**6.1.2 Water Baptism and Regeneration: Separating Symbol and Reality**

Faith Theology insists on a clear distinction between symbol and spiritual reality, while recognising that biblical symbols are revelatory, powerful, and necessary for obedience. It should be noted that regeneration is spiritual, not ritualistic.Jesus’ words in John 3:5—“born of water and of the Spirit”—must be interpreted within the Old Testament prophetic imagery of cleansing and renewal (Ezk 36:25–27). The “water” is symbolic of purification, not literal water baptism. This reading prevents: sacramental overextension, and theological confusion between sign (water baptism) and substance (Spirit-wrought new birth). Similarly, the Spirit regenerates, not ritual. For example, Cornelius received the Spirit before baptism; Paul received the Spirit when Ananias laid hands on him (Acts 9:17–18); the Samaritans believed and were baptised but later received the Spirit through the apostles’ prayers (Acts 8:12–17). This shows spiritual regeneration is not mechanically tied to water. Regeneration is entirely the work of the Word and Spirit (James 1:18; Titus 3:5). Water baptism bears witness to this work but does not perform it.

**6.1.3 Water Baptism, the Word, and Ecclesial Identity**

The early church closely associated baptism with entry into the Christian community after they had received the word of God by faith (Acts 2:41). Faith Theology affirms the ecclesial significance of baptism while critiquing distortions. It is believed that water baptism marks public identification with Christ. Romans 6:3–4 speaks of baptism into Christ’s death, not as a mystical regeneration but as identification with Christ’s redemptive work. It is also a mark of visible admission into the Christian community. The Bible says, those who “gladly received” the Word of God were baptised (Acts 2:41). Water baptism can therefore be seen as a rite of identification, a rite of initiation, and a marker of public confession. The phrase “gladly received” could be interpreted that the people developed faith in the Word of God after hearing it, which is in line with Romans 10:17, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” In other words, hearing or teaching the Word precedes faith and faith in the Word precedes baptism. The true boundary is faith, not water, in the Word of God.

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**6.1.4 Water Baptism and Discipleship**

The Great Commission includes baptism (Matt 28:19), placing it within the discipleship process, not within the salvation process: “Go ye therefore, and teach (make disciples of) all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” This could mean that baptism is a discipleship act because it follows: teaching, believing, repentance, and surrender to Christ; it is part of lifelong formation and symbolises the believer’s entrance into a new pattern of living (Rom 6:11–13) – this is not salvation but sanctification training; baptism is a covenantal pledge because Peter describes baptism as “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet 3:21). It is a pledge, not a sacramental application of grace.

**6.1.5 The Limits of Water Baptism: A Faith-Theological Boundary**

The Faith-Theological framework rejects sacramental ontologies that attribute automatic spiritual effects to water. The Faith—not water—is the means by which believers appropriate divine reality. To avoid doctrinal overreach, Faith Theology defines water baptism’s limits:

1. Water Baptism cannot save (Eph 2:8–9).
2. Water Baptism does not wash away sins (Acts 22:16).
3. Water Baptism cannot regenerate (John 3:5-6).
4. Water Baptism cannot mediate the Spirit (Acts 8:14–17).
5. Water Baptism does not guarantee inclusion in Christ (Rom 9:6).
6. Water Baptism does not erase sin (1 John 1:7).
7. Water Baptism does not replace faith (Heb 11:6).
8. Water Baptism does not provide righteousness (Tit 3:5).

Water baptism is important, biblical, and commanded—but its validity is symbolic, confessional, ecclesial, and discipleship-oriented, not soteriological or sacramental. It should be noted that Water Baptism is biblically valid, spiritually meaningful, publicly confessional, ecclesially significant, and discipleship-oriented. But it is not salvific, not regenerative, and not sacramental in causative terms. Faith Theology ultimately upholds that water baptism depicts what God has done, not what water will do. Faith makes baptism meaningful. Without faith, water baptism becomes a dead ceremonial act. It is important to note th at baptism is valid, necessary for discipleship, but not necessary for salvation.

**7.0 Discussion: Contemporary Misunderstandings and Misapplications of Water Baptism**

Water baptism, despite its clear biblical foundation as explicitly explained in this paper, has often been subject to misunderstanding and misapplication in contemporary Christian practice. These misinterpretations can be grouped into three major categories: ritualism without faith, overemphasis on sacramental efficacy, and denominational exclusivism. This section also discusses contemporary cultural challenges and the theological implications.

***Ritualism Without Faith***

One of the most widespread misapplications of water baptism is its treatment as a mere ritualistic act divorced from genuine faith in Christ. While the Bible commands baptism as an outward expression of inward faith (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4), some traditions elevate the act of immersion itself to a salvific function, reducing the role of personal repentance and faith. Such ritualism risks transforming baptism from a spiritual covenantal act into a ceremonial obligation. From a faith-theological perspective, baptism cannot be separated from the believer's relationship with Christ. The Apostle Peter clearly links baptism to repentance and the forgiveness of sins: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins..." (Acts 2:38). It is vital to note that baptism becomes a hollow observance, devoid of its intended transformative purpose without the accompanying faith and repentance.

***Overemphasis on Sacramental Efficacy***

A second contemporary misapplication is the overemphasis on water baptism as a sacrament that automatically conveys grace or salvation, and independent of personal faith. In some traditions, infant baptism is performed under the presumption of imparting spiritual benefits or securing salvation. While the practice has historical roots, particularly in early Church traditions, a faith-theological reading of the New Testament suggests that baptism’s efficacy is integrally linked to conscious belief and personal commitment. Paul’s epistolary instructions to the Roman and Colossian churches illustrate this point thus: "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God..." (Colossians 2:12). Faith, not mere ritual compliance, is the operative agent in the transformative dimension of baptism.

***Denominational Exclusivism***

A third misapplication is denominational exclusivism, whereby baptism performed in certain church settings is considered valid, while that performed elsewhere is deemed invalid. For examples some Pentecostal churches believe that some mainland churches such as Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, etc are not doing the properly water baptism as specified in Scripture, which is by immersion and not by sprinkling. Similarly, the Pentecostals reject infant baptism that these mainland churches practise. Indeed, the Bible does not support these two practices: baptism by sprinkling and infant baptism. This cannot promote the universality of baptism as an expression of faith in Christ and can foster unnecessary division within the body of Christ. This, indeed, is part of the arguments of this research to establish the truth claims from the biblical from of reference. Moreover, the apostolic pattern, evident in the New Testament, emphasises the theological content of baptism—repentance, faith, and identification with Christ—over ritual or ecclesiastical boundaries (Acts 8:36–38; 10:47–48). From a Scriptural Review perspective, baptism functions as a unifying covenantal act that transcends denominational lines. Its validity rests not in the denomination but in the adherence to the biblical conditions of faith, repentance, and obedience.

***Contemporary Cultural Challenges***

Modern cultural contexts also pose challenges to the practice of baptism. Secularisation, religious pluralism, and a diminished understanding of sacramental theology can lead to both neglect and distortion of baptismal practice. Faith-theological evaluation underscores the need for the Church to reclaim the biblical understanding of baptism as a covenantal response to God’s redemptive work in Christ, rather than a mere cultural or social rite.

***Theological Implications of Misapplications***

These misapplications have significant theological consequences. Ritualism diminishes the personal responsibility and relational dimension of faith. Overemphasis on sacramental efficacy risks promoting a works-based understanding of salvation, contrary to sola fide (faith alone). Denominational exclusivism threatens the unity of the Church and obscures the universality of the Gospel message. Faith-theological reflection insists that water baptism should be understood as a covenantal, faith-mediated act that publicly expresses inward spiritual realities. It is a tangible sign of repentance, faith, and participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3–4), rather than a magical formula or denominational badge.

* 1. **Findings and Impacts**

This study reveals that water baptism is biblically valid as a Christ-instituted ordinance. It also reveals that while baptism is divinely commanded and symbolically rich, Scripture consistently attributes regeneration, justification, and sanctification to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than to ritual immersion. Furthermore, the study unveils that the economy of God is in Jesus Christ alone and not in water baptism. No doubt, the impact of this research work is invaluable given the revelation of the author through scriptural search to remove any pocket of doubt by establishing the validity and limitation of water baptism. This revelation will position the ecclesial message on water baptism within scriptural framework. In addition, it will place a high premium on Scripture as the epistemic foundation and final arbiter of divine truth in Christian Faith Theology.

**9.0 Conclusion**

The author has been able to establish the validity of water baptism by critically evaluating it in relation to salvation, regeneration and the symbolism-reality relationship, ecclesial identity and the Word, discipleship, and the limits of water baptism from a biblical frame of reference. The adoption of a sola scriptura methodology that integrates scriptural review, theological analysis, and a faith-theological evaluation grounded explicitly in divine revelation as the primary authority for Christian belief and practice, coupled with the theo-theoretical models lends more credence to this study. The paper argues that, from a faith-theological perspective, baptism cannot be reduced to a symbolic or sacramental act alone; it is a holistic spiritual encounter. It reflects the believer’s personal faith, incorporates the communal dimensions of the Church, and functions as an instrument of pastoral care and spiritual formation. The study asserts that by integrating scriptural instruction, pastoral guidance, and communal participation, baptism fulfils its intended role as both a covenantal and transformative act within the Christian life. The author also argues that the final arbiter and epistemic foundation of divine truth is Scripture and the economy of God is in Jesus Christ alone.

**References**

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*Lecture Notes on Basic Doctrines*. The Redeemed Christian Bible College: 2003, pp.38-41

The King James Bible

The Living Bible: Life Application Bible for Students

1. All scriptural citations are from the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Emphasis is mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a better understanding, see *Lecture Notes on Basic Doctrines*. The Redeemed Christian Bible College: 2003, pp.38-41 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Living Bible: Life Application Bible for Students [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note that the emphasis on each speaker’s name by putting them in bold is mine. It is for the purpose of quick review of each speaker’s view by the readers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lexically, Catechesis is religious instruction given orally to catechumens. Catechumen is a convert to Christianity under instruction before baptism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a better understanding, see Ilesanmi, Dele A. “The Imperative of Scriptural Review in Biblical Research Studies: A Proposal for Paradigm Shift from Literature Review” in International Journal of Biblical Research Studies, 2025, Vol.1 (1) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ilesanmi, Dele A. “Faith Theology as a Non-Empirical Approach to Understanding Divine Truth: A Study of Abstracted and Concreted Realities” in International Journal of Biblical Research Studies, 2025. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)