

# Why Was Paul Sent Not to Baptize?

## *1 Corinthians 1:17*

As I was about to baptize a forty-year-old woman her hand shot out and grabbed the side of the baptistery with such force that I could not put her under. She was very hard of hearing, so I wondered whether or not she understood my explanation before trying to baptize her. She said she understood me well enough. Her problem was related to an extreme fear of going under the water, because she almost drowned when she was nine. We talked about it for a minute. She felt reassured and ready to go ahead with the baptism. As soon as the back of her head touched the water, her hydrophobia took over and a panic-stricken hand grabbed the side of the baptistery again and so up she came. At this point, I suggested she get out, and we would talk and try again later. “No, I want to be baptized now!” was her reply. Well, who was I to argue with her sincere desire to obey the Gospel? Although I did think about sending her across the street to have the Methodist preacher sprinkle her. However, there were too many of the brethren present. They say the third time is a charm. Again, just as before, as soon as the back of her head touched the water, her hand shot out and gripped the side of the baptistery. This time I reach over with my hand and pulled her hand loose and while holding her wrist shoved her under the water. She came up out of that baptistery with a renewed fear of water, but she came up a new creature. I came away with a new perspective on Paul’s comments to the Corinthians: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect” (1 Cor. 1:17).

Some have understood this passage to teach that Paul was not sent to baptize, thus baptism is not important to salvation. Others go so far as to use this verse to teach that baptism is not even part of preaching the Gospel. “Paul in fact drew a clear distinction between the preaching of the gospel and baptism when he said, “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel...” 1 Cor. 1:17 (Water Baptism and Salvation: A Response to the Teaching of the Church of Christ, Keith Johnson).

Before we investigate what Paul is trying to say in this passage, let us first observe what this verse of Scripture does not say. It does not say that Paul did not baptize. It does not say that Paul did not preach the essentiality of baptism to salvation. It does not say that Paul did not baptize lest some should think baptism was essential to salvation. It does not say the baptism is not part of the Gospel. It does not say that baptism is not essential to salvation.

Surely, Paul did baptize others. At Philippi, he baptized both the household of Lydia (Acts 16:14,15) and the household of the Jailor (30-34). He baptized about twelve men in Ephesus who only knew of the baptism of John (Acts 19:1f). In Acts 18:8, we find that some of the Corinthians were baptized (18:8). In fact, within the very context of the verse under investigation, Paul admits to having baptized Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:14,16). Concerning this passage Alford wrote: “It is evident that this is said in no derogation of baptism, for he did on occasion baptize...” (Greek Test., vol. 2, 478).

Furthermore, throughout his various epistles, Paul wrote about the importance of baptism in

relation to salvation. Later, in his first letter to the Corinthians, he showed they were all baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). In his letter to the Romans, baptism is shown to be necessary to be buried with Christ and to arise out of the water to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:2-5; 17,18). He wrote to the Ephesians about the one baptism that could sanctify and cleanse with the washing of the water (Eph. 4:4-6; 5:26). To the churches of Galatia, Paul wrote, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). He reminded the church at Colossae that they were "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" (Col. 2:12). Without question, Paul believed that baptism was part of preaching the Gospel.

In fact, Paul himself was baptized so that his sins could be washed away (Acts 22:16; 9:12). This was done at the direction of Ananias who was sent to Paul by the Lord Himself to tell Paul what he must do.

The immediate context of 1 Corinthians chapter one and verse seventeen shows the importance of baptism. The church at Corinth had several problems. The one being dealt with by Paul in this section is divisiveness. The brethren were dividing up over the preacher who had baptized them (v. 12). For this cause he thanked God that few were baptized of him, and not that a few were baptized (v. 15). "Baptism was such an important thing in the view of the early Christians that Paul congratulated himself in having baptized so few at Corinth, lest some should say that he 'baptized in his own name' - lest the faith and reverence due to Christ might be 'divided' - and a part be transferred to the distinguished administrator. How could this have been, if baptism had been a mere symbol of no vital consequence?" (J. W. Wilmarth, "Baptism and Remission," Baptist Quarterly, July, 1877, pp. 312,313).

Here we find the very roots of denominational thinking by early Christians. They were actually calling themselves disciples of those who had baptized them in water. Paul informs them of three prerequisites in order for one to call himself after another religiously (13). He asks three rhetorical questions: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? The answers to the questions are obviously "no," "no," and "no." This proves they should only call themselves after Christ in whose name they were baptized. It also shows that baptism is just as necessary to the putting on the name of Christ as Christ's crucifixion.

Part of the confusion over this verse comes from Paul's use of an ellipsis. An ellipsis is a figure of speech where certain words which are not directly expressed are to be understood. Commonly an ellipsis comes as with a "not ...but" construction. "Christ sent me not to baptize (only), but (also) to preach the gospel." Below are several examples of other ellipsis in the New Testament.

- Jn. 6:27 - "Do not (only) labor for the food which perishes, but (also) for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."
- Jn. 12:44 - "He that believes on men, believes not on me (only), but (also) on him that sent me."
- 1 Tim. 5:23 - "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (KJV). Compare it to the New King James Version: "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities."
- Matt. 10:34 - "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth (only). I did not come to bring peace but (also) a sword."

- 1 Pet. 3:3, 4a - “Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on fine apparel (only); but (also) let it be the hidden person of the heart,”

In the last example, no one thinks that Peter is forbidding women from putting on apparel. Godly wives are not to go around naked. In each of these examples it is apparent that a complete rejection of the first component is not the point but rather its de-emphasis in comparison with the component introduced by the word “but.” The “hidden person of the heart” is emphasized as more important than “putting on fine apparel.” So, in our text Paul is saying the preaching is more important than baptism because anyone could baptize, but not everyone could preach the Word of God.

Is Paul really trying to teach that baptism is not part of the Gospel? Better yet, let us ask another question: Can one preach the Gospel without preaching baptism? Can one preach about salvation through Jesus and not preach baptism? Consider the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. He was reading from Isaiah 53. Not understanding of whom the prophet spoke, the Ethiopian invited Philip into his chariot to explain. Philip preached to him Jesus out of Isaiah 53. Down the road the Ethiopian wanted to be baptized. How did he know about baptism? Isaiah 53 does not mention baptism. Philip must have preached baptism when he preached about the Good News of Jesus. This is exactly what happened when Philip preached the name of Jesus Christ to the Samaritans. “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:12).

Could Jesus’ apostles preach the Gospel without preaching baptism? During the Great Commission, Christ commanded His apostles to, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15,16).

In fact, part of believing the Gospel includes being baptized. “Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8). Later, Paul would write: “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,” (1 Cor. 1:14).

So, why did Paul emphasize the preaching of the cross instead of baptizing people? The contrast Paul is making is between preaching and baptizing. Consider the following syllogism:

Incorrect syllogism:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major premise: Christ sent me not to baptize.</li> <li>• Minor premise: Christ did send me to preach the Gospel.</li> <li>• Conclusion: Therefore, baptism is not a part of the Gospel.</li> </ul>
Corrected syllogism:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major premise - Christ sent me not to baptize.</li> <li>• Minor Premise - Christ did send me to preach the Gospel.</li> <li>• Conclusion - Therefore, to baptize is not part of being sent to preach the Gospel.</li> </ul>

At first, one might argue that these two syllogisms are the same. However, the incorrect syllogism introduces the word “baptism” in the conclusion. This word does not appear in the major

or minor premises. Paul is speaking of “baptizing,” not “baptism.” The word which should be used in the conclusion is baptize (verb) rather than baptism (noun). After all, the word for “preach” is the Greek verb euanggelizo. The contrast is not between baptism and the Gospel. The contrast is between the act of baptizing someone and the act of preaching the Gospel. Baptizing is not part of the act of preaching the Gospel. We all know this to be a fact. The Gospel can be preached week after week without anyone being baptized.

It is baptism that is essential to one’s salvation, no baptizing. In other words, it is the reception, not the administration, of baptism that is essential to one’s salvation. One must be baptized to be saved. One does not have to baptize another in order to be saved or to preach the Gospel. As an apostle, Paul’s purpose was to go out and preach the Gospel. Whether Paul baptized or had Timothy do all the baptisms was of no consequences to his commission as an apostle. Who administers baptism is of no consequence to one’s salvation just so long as they are baptized. Paul is defending his work as an apostle which is to preach the Gospel. He is not degrading the purpose of baptism. Christ made Paul an apostle to preach the Gospel. Christ did not have to make him an apostle so he could administer baptism. The context addresses the purpose of Paul’s apostleship; it says nothing as to the purpose of baptism.

Even the word “sent” demonstrates Paul’s apostolic commission. “Sent” is from the Greek word *apostelein*, a cognate of the Greek word for “apostle” (*apostolos*). It means an official is sent in an authoritative capacity. Conybeare and Howson interpret the verse to mean, “For Christ sent me forth as His apostle” (*The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, 383). Paul was sent out as an apostle not so he could baptize, but so he could preach the Gospel (Ac. 9:15,16; 22:14,15; 26:16-20). Just as in Acts 6:1f, the apostles were not sent out to serve tables to widows but to pray and preach. This does not mean that widows in the church must be neglected, but that others can do that while apostles preach the Gospel. Likewise, it is not necessary to be an apostle to baptize.

Barnes wrote: “That is, ‘not to baptize as my main business.’ Baptism was not his principal employment, though he had a commission in common with others to administer the ordinance, and occasionally did it.” In fact, Paul was commanded to baptize people as are all those who obey the great commission (Mt. 28:18,19). If Christ did not send Paul to baptize, Christ repudiated his great commission. If Christ did not send Paul to baptize, Paul disobeyed Christ, for he did baptize. If Christ did send Paul to baptize, Paul was unfaithful if he did not. In 2 Tim. 4:7 Paul said that he “kept the faith.”

It was not necessary for Jesus to appear to Paul on the road to Damascus to make a baptizer of him. Anybody could administer baptism. Jesus appeared to him so he could be an apostle. At that time the Gospel couldn’t be preached by just anyone, but just anybody could baptize. Jimmy Allen explained this well when he wrote: “I have preached in meetings with more than 200 baptisms without once getting into the water. The brethren called me to preach rather than to baptize. However, in every sermon, I urged the unsaved to be baptized” (*Commentary On 1 Corinthians* 31).

Yes, baptism is a part of the Gospel message. Paul was baptized when the Gospel was preached to him. He baptized others after they heard the Gospel message preached. He wrote about the importance of baptism in the Gospel message on many occasions. Nowhere did he teach that baptism was not part of preaching the Gospel. If you have not been baptized - you have not obeyed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Unlike Paul your sins have not been washed away.