

Church of Christ Baptism: Structure, Meaning, and Practice

Ex- Church of Christ members may struggle to communicate that they want a Christian Baptism. They were raised in a system with no real doctrinal instruction, only social conditioning and short, works-focused sermons. When they ask for a Christian baptism, they are often dismissed by mainstream Christians who see the Churches of Christ as simply another denomination. ***Christians unknowingly validate non-Christian baptismal practices and condone any abuse that may have occurred.***

Mainstream Christianity typically does not recognize that the Churches of Christ operate as a high-control sect with a non-standard baptismal practice that is not, in function or meaning, the same as historic Christian baptism. As a result, survivors are often perceived as overreacting, legalistic, or confused when they attempt to explain their need for a Christian baptism. They were never taught the theological vocabulary needed to articulate their concerns, only slogans, proof-texts, and social rules.

Different denominations will object to different aspects of Church of Christ baptism, the lack of Trinitarian theology, the false gospel, the absence of the Holy Spirit, the absence of conversion, the coercive nature of the act, the purely mechanical logic, the authority of who performed the baptism, or the sectarian exclusivity. ***Survivors do not know which element matters to which church, and they lack the vocabulary to articulate the theological problems.***

Here I aim to write what a Church of Christ of baptism is, what it signifies, and its purpose so that survivors will have the vocabulary they need to communicate, and then their clergy will have the information they need to determine if a baptism is warranted.

First a Disclaimer

- I am not attempting to invalidate *all* Church of Christ or Campbellite Baptisms
- If you struggle with your baptism, please **speak to your clergy**.
- You do not need an emergency baptism to “fix” your Church of Christ baptism. **Speak to your clergy**.
- Some people are happy with their Church of Christ Baptisms. Not all ex CoC members want a baptism or need one.
- **I am not suggesting re-baptism**. I am providing resources for those who wish to have their first and only Christian baptism.
- I will not define what a Christian Baptism is, nor will I compare Church of Christ baptisms to Christian practices in other denominations. I will not go over Christian Baptismal Doctrines.

The goal of this project is ONLY to give survivors the vocabulary necessary to communicate with clergy to explain why they are requesting a Christian baptism, or why they feel they need one. In addition, clergy can then understand Church of Christ baptisms, and they can decide on how to proceed. This article is NOT to debate Church of Christ baptisms against other denominations to claim one is more right than the other. Nor am I hashing out immersion versus sprinkling or believer’s baptism versus pedobaptism.

Practices That Appear Christian

A Church of Christ baptism looks similar to baptisms in broader Christianity because familiar Christian terms and actions are used, but those terms carry different definitions within the group. Baptism in the Churches of Christ exists exclusively for the remission of sins and is one required step within a five-step Plan of Salvation that must be performed *unto salvation* -that is, in *order to obtain it*. It is condensed around the baptism and is not an ongoing process

To understand how a Church of Christ Baptism may be invalid you have to understand who Jesus is to them, what they believe he did, what their gospel is, and the 5 step Plan of Salvation within the Churches of Christ. **As a caution, many of those within the Churches of Christ do not understand that these are the teachings. When these ideas are spoken back to them in plain English using proper Christian terminology, they do not recognize them.**

What is a Church of Christ Baptism?

From a Churches of Christ perspective, baptism accomplishes a very specific, narrowly defined function: it is solely for the remission of past sins. It does not represent union with Christ, ongoing sanctification, or receipt of the Holy Spirit in the way mainstream Christianity understands it. Baptism the last step in their Plan of Salvation, and the moment the disciple is saved.

It is an act of obedience to a prescribed pattern of salvation, where the ritual itself, full immersion, spoken words, and intellectual assent, erases prior sins much like a clean slate. After baptism, the individual is considered eligible to join the One True Church, which is defined by adherence to the New Testament pattern as interpreted through the church's hermeneutic. The baptism does not ensure future righteousness, prevent future sin, or confer spiritual gifts; it merely clears past transgressions so that the baptized person can begin anew under the Church's authority.

Who is Jesus in the Churches of Christ?

Formally:

Jesus is the divine Son of God, Savior, Lord, and King.

Functionally:

Jesus is the lawgiver of the New Testament pattern, the author of the church blueprint, the one whose authority demands compliance. His atonement is activated only at baptism. He is respected but not related to, a model or an example to

follow. The plan is central; Jesus is the justification for the plan. Jesus is the architect, not the center. The plan is the savior, and Jesus is the reason the plan exists.

In practice, Jesus' role is subordinate to the plan, the pattern, and the commands. He is seen first as:

- The One who authorizes
- The One who commands
- The One who establishes the blueprint

The controlling idea is:

“What did Jesus command the church to do, what were the examples we are to replicate?”

Not:

“What has Jesus done for us?”

His *authority* is emphasized more than His *person*.

Jesus' atonement is real but incomplete until baptism.

Within CoC soteriology:

- Jesus provides the sacrifice.
- The believer must access the sacrifice only by baptism.
- The forgiveness He offers is not applied until the person completes the steps.

Jesus opens the door, but the convert must walk through via the plan.

Church of Christ Definitions

GOSPEL: The Gospel is the *Plan of Salvation* culminating in baptism for the remission of sins. The “good news” is not finished until a person hears, believes, repents, confesses, and is immersed. It is a conditional salvation message with specific steps.

BELIEVE: Belief means intellectual acceptance that Jesus is the Son of God, but belief alone cannot save. It is only Step 2 of 5. Faith does not justify until completed through baptism.

REPENT: Repent means to stop sinning and morally reform. It is an ethical prerequisite before baptism is valid. If repentance is incomplete, the baptism may be doubted.

CONFESSION: Confession is a formulaic spoken declaration immediately before baptism:

“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” This confession *activates* the validity of the coming immersion.

BAPTISM: Baptism is the exact moment of salvation, where sins are forgiven, a person enters Christ, and one receives the Holy Spirit. If the immersion is not performed with the correct intentions, it’s invalid.

THE WORD: The Word is primarily the New Testament pattern, especially the commands relating to salvation and church practice. It’s the blueprint for restoring the first-century church.

SIN: Sin is defined primarily as a violation of God’s revealed commands, acts or omissions that break the laws and patterns laid out in Scripture, particularly the New Testament. Sin refers to specific wrong actions, measurable failures of obedience, and incorrect responses to divine instruction rather than an inherited condition or a pervasive state of the heart.

THE REMISSION OF SIN: Remission of sins the cancellation removal of all past sins the individual may have committed at the moment of immersion, with no effect on future sins and no ongoing cleansing.

OBEDIENCE: Obedience is defined as completing the required actions of the blueprint hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized, and remaining faithful performed exactly in the correct order and manner. Obedience also encompasses continued conformity to the practices and doctrines derived from their restorationist hermeneutic, including congregational worship patterns, moral expectations, and ongoing faithfulness.

The 5 Step Plan of Salvation is Baptism

The Plan of Salvation is all completed at the baptism, it is not a lifelong process. **Hear the word, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.** These are Christian words, and to the average Christian the list appears orthodox. That appearance is the core of the confusion: the outward vocabulary is Christian, but the internal definitions are not. These steps are required for the baptism to be effective.

Often these steps are not clarified or spoken out loud to those who are getting baptized. Many of those within the Churches of Christ do not realize they are following a Plan of Salvation.

Hear the Gospel: Step 1

Hear the word of God means being told the correct information about the Bible, *the correct gospel*. It does not mean God's call, spiritual awakening, encounter with Scripture, or conversion. Salvation cannot start until someone teaches you the version of the gospel the Church of Christ believes is the original New Testament pattern. Any testimony involving a spiritual stirring would have been dismissed as illegitimate. Hearing the word of God signifies that one has recognized the New Testament Pattern alone defines the Gospel.

Prooftexts

Romans 10:17 “So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.“

Acts 2:37 “Now when they heard *this*, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?“

Luke 24:47 “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.“

Believe the Gospel: Step 2

Believe the Gospel means making an intellectual choice to accept that the Gospel, according to the Churches of Christ, is true. It does not require reading, understanding, or being taught the Scriptures. It does not require the Holy Spirit or conversion. It is agreement, not transformation.

Prooftexts

Hebrews 11:6

“But without faith *it is impossible to please him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

John 8:24

“I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am *he*, ye shall die in your sins.”

Mark 16:16

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

Repent: Step 3

Repent means that you must make a deliberate decision to abandon sinful behavior and realign your life with God’s will, which is the New Testament Gospel, the Plan of Salvation. This step is treated as proof that your belief is serious.

Prooftexts

Acts 2:38

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name

of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Acts 17:30

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:”

Luke 13:3

“And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins;”

Confession: Step 4

Confession consists of a single permitted sentence: “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*” Act: 8:37. This is the only *right* confession and the only one that is acceptable. This is intellectual agreement to say the verse out loud before the baptism, not a confession of personal faith. **This is not an agreement with the Trinity.** They do not have that concept as it is man made. The New Testament Pattern tells them they must say this exact sentence for the Plan of Salvation to work.

Prooftexts

Romans 10:9–10

“But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, *even* in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach. 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.”

Acts 8:37

“And 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.”

Be Baptized: Step 5

Be Baptized is the final step, and it must be performed by full immersion. All other forms of baptism are considered invalid. In fact, all baptisms from all other churches are deemed invalid because the Churches of Christ teach that only their baptisms accomplish the remission of sins. Their baptism erases past sins and allows the Holy Spirit to have some role, but the Holy Spirit is not involved before that moment and does not continue with the convert afterward. This moment is when the convert can access the Blood of Christ. The effect of baptism is a cleansing of past sin only; it does not deal with future sins, which may require repeat baptisms.

Prooftexts

Acts 2:38

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Acts 22:16

“And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

Mark 16:16

“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

1 Peter 3:21

“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.”

Galatians 3:27

“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

Romans 6:3–4

“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?”

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

In the moments before the convert is baptized the phrase **“I now baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for the remission of sin,”** must be spoken verbally as part of the Plan of Salvation. It is a formula to activate the blood of Christ. The verses command this statement be said and the remission of sins is the desired outcome. If the baptizer did not use the formula, God does not apply remission of sins. Use of the phrase is proof that this baptism is the correct New Testament baptism, not one influenced by other Christians.

“In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” is stated only because they interpret Matthew 28:19 as a command. Churches of Christ doctrine teaches that a person contacts the blood of Christ at immersion, and that contact produces remission of sins. But they believe that contact only happens if the baptism is done “in the name.” Speaking the phrase is how the baptizer activates that access.

Explicitly stating **“for the remission of sins”** at the moment of baptism certifies that the act is being performed with the correct intent and therefore counts in God’s eyes. The remission itself is tied to proper obedience, not to Christ’s person or ongoing grace. Because remission is a legal transaction in their theology, the formula must be spoken to make the transaction valid.

Prooftexts

Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Matthew 28:19 “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”.

Luke 24:27 “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Mark 1:4 John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Matthew 26:28 For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

They interpret Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38 literally and legally: Jesus said the phrase; therefore, the phrase must be spoken, or the baptism is invalid. **Belief in the Trinity is not required, and in practice the group teaches multiple contradictory and historically heretical views about the Godhead.** The spoken phrase functions as a formal authorization stamp: the baptizer must recite it to demonstrate obedience to the biblical command and to validate the baptism as legitimate for the remission of sins. The wording is not used to express belief in the Trinity, most congregations do not teach or emphasize Trinitarian doctrine, and many members hold various inconsistent views about the Godhead.

Instead, the phrase serves as procedural compliance with what they see as the New Testament pattern. If the words are not spoken, the baptism is often considered invalid, even if the immersion was sincere, complete, and performed with faith and repentance. Thus, the formula is not doctrinal in meaning but functional its purpose is to secure authorization, prove conformity to Scripture, and ensure the baptism counts within their system.

This baptism grants membership in the One True Church defined as the only body that has decoded the supposed hidden Pattern of Salvation in the New Testament. They claim to have discovered this pattern through hermeneutics, and as a result the entire Plan of Salvation is compressed into the ritual of baptism rather than being understood as the lifelong work of sanctification.

Coercion and Abusive Practices

The Churches of Christ do not view baptism as union with Christ, an engrafting into the Body, or a proclamation of faith. Their Commission is to baptize for the remission of sin and to teach the Gospel of the New Testament Pattern. All men, regardless of character, intent, expertise, or age are qualified to baptize. This creates the idea that they are doing good works by baptizing and that they as individual members of the Church of Christ are responsible for completing Christ's work which can lead to coercive and abusive baptisms.

The dynamics of Churches of Christ baptism create a wide range of psychological, ecclesial, doctrinal, and ethical distortions. Members are raised in a constant state of spiritual panic, taught that every unbaptized person is perched on the edge of damnation and that any delay in immersion is a moral failure that could cost a soul. This produces a sense of responsibility in which individuals feel personally accountable for the eternal fate of others, generating lifelong anxiety, intrusive guilt, and a reflexive fear of questioning anything.

Baptism can become an emergency rescue operation, not a sacramental incorporation into Christ. Any male member, regardless of age and maturity or position, may perform baptisms with no training, oversight, or pastoral formation. Normal boundaries do not exist because saving a soul takes precedence over privacy, propriety, and consent. This leads to fathers baptizing daughters, teenage boys baptizing younger girls, and baptisms being performed in bathtubs, hotel pools, and lakes at night sometimes flippantly, often frantically, but always under the logic of urgency and earning good works.

Ethical problems arise naturally from their doctrinal instability. Coercive baptisms are common, especially among children and teens, college campuses, occurring at sleepovers, youth events, VBS programs, and any gathering where peer pressure or adult manipulation can be applied, without parental consent or pastoral oversight. Emotional vulnerability, fear, and social pressure often replace genuine conviction. Because the goal is to immerse as many people as possible, decency norms are suspended, and pastoral care is nonexistent. Emergency immersions of frightened teenagers, terminally ill children, or distressed adults becomes a predictable feature of the system.

Remission of sins is treated not as union with Christ or the regenerative work of the Spirit but as a technical transaction that scrubs away past sins without addressing future ones. This mechanistic view undermines itself, since baptisms performed under incorrect intent, faulty wording, or insufficient sincerity are feared to be invalid. Many members therefore pursue repeated baptisms in a misguided attempt to secure assurance.

Prooftexts Used to Support Their Position That Baptism Is Necessary for Salvation

Baptism Saves and is Necessary for Salvation:

These are the core verses used to argue that baptism is the *moment* salvation occurs.

- **Mark 16:16** – “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”
- **Acts 2:38** – “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”
- **1 Peter 3:21** – “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:”

- **Acts 22:16** – “arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

Baptism as the entry point into Christ / the church:

Used to assert that baptism is the moment one becomes a Christian.

- **Romans 6:3–4** – “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore 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.”
- **Galatians 3:27** – “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”
- **1 Corinthians 12:13** – “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

CoC interprets “into Christ” literally: baptism is the moment of spiritual relocation.

Baptism must follow belief and repentance:

Used to structure baptism as the final “step.”

- **Acts 2:38** – “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”
- **Acts 8:12** – “when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”
- **Acts 18:8** – “believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.”

CoC treats this as a chronological formula, the Plan of Salvation.

Baptism is required for forgiveness:

Used to define baptism as the moment sins are removed.

- **Acts 2:38** – “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”
- **Acts 22:16** – “arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

These are taken literally: sin removal happens *only* at baptism.

Baptism is not symbolic:

Used to reject symbolic interpretations.

- **1 Peter 3:21** – “whereunto *even* baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh)”
- **John 3:5** – “born of water and *of* the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”
CoC interprets water here as water baptism, not childbirth or symbolism.

Baptism is the moment the Holy Spirit begins to work:

Used to teach that the Spirit comes *after* immersion, not before.

- **Acts 2:38** – “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”
(Interpreted as coming *only after* baptism.)

- **Ephesians 1:13** – “In whom ye also *trusted*, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.”

Baptism as obedience to Christ:

Used to claim baptism is a commanded act.

- **Matthew 28:19** – “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”
- **Acts 10:48** – “And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.”

This is used to frame baptism as a required act of obedience and not a work.

Sources

Personal Experience. I was like a Pharisee from the strictest, most zealous group of Churches of Christ, the Non-Institutional. I participated in preserving and defending their gospel truth, even though I myself did not fully comprehend it. I have also attended moderate and progressive liberal branches. I witnessed numerous baptisms and even had my own traumatic non-Christian Baptism.

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