

Must Faith Precede Baptism?: From Paul to the Early Church

Sue Ann Mak.

DPhil, University of Oxford Currently at The Queen's Foundation,
Birmingham, UK (pre-ordination training)

sueannmak@gmail.com

iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3994-2587>

Received: Dec. 11, 2025

Revised: Dec. 11, 2025

Accepted: Dec. 25, 2025

Abstract

The traditional view that assumes faith before baptism has often been challenged and revisited in the context of infant baptism debates. This survey, however, is not carried out with infant baptism in mind but baptism for individuals able to decide and answer for themselves. I reevaluate the faith-baptism question by examining views from Paul's letters as well as from early church documents, to see if the former share discernible faith-baptism links with the latter. I study three faith-baptism Pauline texts (Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:25-26; Col 2:12) before looking at first to third-century church documents like the Didache, Syrian Didascalia Apostolorum, and Apostolic Tradition for their baptismal practices, to ask how similar or different the latter are from what we understand could be the earliest baptismal understandings in Paul. In short, I am interested to know i) whether faith (an external-relational redefinition) was a necessary prerequisite for baptism and ii) if the earliest church documents share similarities on the matter with Pauline baptismal passages. I conclude that there is no clear evidence in Paul and the early church that faith was a necessary prerequisite for water baptism until the third century, but faith is required to precede baptism in order to understand and validate baptism as metaphor.

Keywords: Baptism, Faith, Paul, Early Church, Water, Spirit

Since the second century, it has been assumed that the initiation rite of baptism presupposes faith, particularly the public confession of faith.¹ Nonetheless, the traditional view that assumes faith before baptism has often been challenged and revisited in the context of infant baptism debates. This survey, however, is not carried out with infant baptism in mind but baptism for individuals able to decide and answer for themselves, since there is a lack of evidence that paedo-baptism was universal in the early centuries.² In this essay, I reevaluate the faith-baptism question by examining views from Paul's letters as well as from early church documents, to see if the former share discernible faith-baptism links with the latter.

Paul is our focus of analysis because he provides modern-day biblical and liturgical scholars with the earliest and most number of baptismal references in his writings. I begin by studying three faith-baptism Pauline texts (Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:25-26; Col 2:12). Then I look at first to third-century church documents like the *Didache*, Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and *Apostolic Tradition* for their baptismal practices, to ask how similar or different they are from what we understand could be the earliest baptismal understandings in Paul. In short, I am interested to know i) whether faith (see definition of 'faith' below) was a necessary prerequisite for baptism, and ii) if the earliest church documents share similarities on the matter with Pauline baptismal passages.

¹ See Kinzig 2017, 1:145-164 for examples of direct and indirect evidence of "Baptismal Interrogations from the Second and Third Centuries". Below I also demonstrate that the insertion of Acts 8:37 and the knowledge of this insertion in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* suggest that the idea of faith preceding baptism was not uncommon by the latter half of the second century.

² Bradshaw 2009, 82. He relies on David Wright's research to assert that "there is a lack of evidence to support the view that the practice of paedo-baptism was universal in the early centuries, and in those places where it did take place, it often seems to have had more to do with the fear of the child dying unbaptized, because of the high level of infant mortality, than any fundamental conviction that all babies ought to be baptized". Bradshaw then points readers to refer to David Wright's "The Origins of Infant Baptism – Child Believers' Baptism?" (1987); "How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism in the Early Church?" (1987); and "At What Ages were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?" (1997).

It must be noted that I adopt a (re)definition of the understanding of ‘faith’ (πίστις) in this study: I move away from the more common perception of an individual, personal trust in Christ to a broader, polyvalent perception of faith. I hope that early church information and a redefined πίστις (and its cognates) will shed new light on an old debate. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin the essay by presenting the concept of faith that will be used to reassess the relationship between ‘faith’ and ‘baptism’, before asking if the assumption that faith preceded baptism was common knowledge from the first few centuries of the church.

A (Re)definition of ‘Faith’

There has been renewed interest within the scholarly guild in recent years in rethinking ‘faith’ and the πιστ- word group in Paul. Matthew Bates demonstrates the major shift in the understanding of Christian faith, from one that is an internal attitude of trust (influenced by Rudolf Bultmann) to one that is relational and outwardly manifest; he terms this recent development an “external-relational shift”.³ Similarly, Teresa Morgan’s thorough research demonstrates that πίστις/*fides* in the ancient world is “inherently relational and characteristically expressed in action towards other human beings”.⁴ She argues that Roman Faith and Christian Faith, as understood and expressed by the earliest Christians, is different from Augustine’s understanding of faith as the belief in Christian doctrine and the believer’s faith that happens in their heart and mind.⁵

³ Bates 2020, 176.

⁴ Morgan 2015, 472.

⁵ Augustine in *De trin.* 13.2.5 (trans. *NPNF* 3:168–169) defines faith as the receiving of Jesus and as something that takes place in the believer’s heart and mind. Morgan in “The Invention of Faith” argues that the earliest Christians were indeed unique in the way they placed trust/faith at the heart of their relationship with God and Christ, but their faith in God shaped the “relationships between human beings, the authority structure of churches, and the way Christians imagined the kingdom of heaven” (which was contemporaneous with the Greeks, Romans and Jews).

Relatedly, Nijay Gupta objects to the idea of πίστις as nonwork, “a kind of passive reliance on Christ,” because to treat πίστις “as opposite to work, doing, or human agency makes little sense to Paul.”⁶ Additionally, given the centrality of Christology in Paul’s writing, I define Paul’s use of πίστις as Christ’s faith or the faithfulness of Christ, placing Jesus in the centre as the one trusted by God and humanity. *In nuce*, for this essay, “faith” is (re)defined as the faithfulness of Christ that calls for human trust in God and for external action towards others in response to Christ. Those not used to this (re)definition might find the expanded definition too broad and, hence, would think that it risks making the presence of faith difficult to determine or falsify. I maintain that it is intentionally broad to encompass expressions of faith, especially through relational actions, that are not commonly recognized.

Baptism and Faith in Pauline Literature

With this broader, redefined lens of faith, we examine three different places in Paul’s letters—Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:26-27; Col 2:12—that point to baptism and faith.⁷ But, first, I present a snapshot of how twenty-first century scholars have presented competing views on Pauline baptism and faith.

George Beasley-Murray writes that “against every tendency of NT theologians to minimize the Pauline doctrine of faith it must be insisted that in his teaching, faith in God manifested in Christ is *prior* to baptism.”⁸ James Denney does not specify the chronology of faith and baptism, but thinks that “baptism and faith are but the outside and the inside of the same thing.”⁹ James Dunn, however, offers a more reserved observation because “Paul says nothing explicit about the correlation of faith and baptism – itself an

⁶ Gupta 2020, 143.

⁷ Eph 4:5 is not included because it emphasizes “oneness” and unity, and there is no indication as to how Paul related faith and the water rite)

⁸ Beasley-Murray 1962, 304 (*italics original*).

⁹ Denney 1951, 185.

interesting feature in one who saw the response of faith as such a crucial and sole defining element.”¹⁰ Most sceptical is Ben Witherington who argues that in Paul’s writings there is nowhere a close association of water baptism to faith, no evidence of baptism as a seal of preexisting faith, and that baptism does not presuppose the faith response.¹¹

Beasley-Murray believes that beginning with Romans 6 will provide a balanced estimate since it has the most extensive exposition and is unlike 1 Cor 1:14ff that “accords a minimum significance to baptism.”¹² In direct contrast, Witherington returns frequently to 1 Cor 1 to remind readers that water baptism is clearly “not at the top of Paul’s list of things to teach or worry about.”¹³ Neither approach is helpful in examining Pauline passages since Paul does not treat baptism systematically and there does not appear to be any particular passage that is meant to define the doctrine of baptism.

Galatians 3:26-27

I prefer to begin where Paul possibly began. Assuming an early date,¹⁴ Galatians would be one of the oldest texts in the NT (and possibly Paul’s oldest writing) that deals with baptism, and that also includes the mention of faith prior to the mention of baptism. This is captured in two verses from chapter 3:

¹⁰ Dunn 1998, 457.

¹¹ Witherington 2007, 120, 88, 85.

¹² Beasley-Murray 1962, 126.

¹³ Witherington 2007, 79.

¹⁴ The dating of Galatians continues to be debated, depending on whether one subscribes to the North Galatia (c.53-58 AD) or South Galatia (c.49-50 AD) theory; I am sympathetic to the arguments of the South Galatianists, hence, adopting the earlier date. Longenecker 1990, lxxiii thinks that “the date of Galatians is one of the most knotty problems in Pauline studies”. See also dating discussion in George 1994, 46–50.

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children (sons) of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Πάντες γὰρ υἱοὶ θεοῦ ἐστε διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ· ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε (Gal 3:26-27)

On the question of faith in relation to baptism, Cosmas Alule thinks Gal 3:26-27 shows that “the condition of Christians as sons of God through faith is due to their baptism.”¹⁵ Lars Hartman views baptism as “the ritual side of faith.”¹⁶ Richard Longenecker demonstrates that through the γάρ conjunction (v.27), the thesis statement in v.26 is confirmed by the confessional portion of vv.27–28. He adds that the adjective “as many as” (ὅσοι) that starts v.27 parallels the earlier adjective “all” or “every” (πάντες) that starts v.26, so, “faith in Christ Jesus” is paralleled by “baptized into Christ”.¹⁷ Nonetheless, even if it appears that faith (v.26) and baptism (v.27) are working hand in glove, the assumption requires closer examination and further testing.

First, we should continue to redefine “faith” given the shift in scholarly research. Morgan has convincingly argued that, in Galatians, Paul articulates a tripartite configuration of faith with “Christ in the center of a nexus of faithfulness, trustworthiness, and trust which runs in all directions between God and Christ, Christ and humanity, and humanity and God.”¹⁸ Therefore, faith is not only one’s personal trust in Jesus, but also Jesus’ faithfulness as one “who gave himself for our sins” (1:4). Jesus’ faithfulness as the risen Christ is also emphasized by David Downs and Benjamin Lappenga in their work on reading πίστις through the lens of the exalted Lord in Paul’s letters.¹⁹

¹⁵ Alule 2000, 50.

¹⁶ Hartman 1997, 55–6.

¹⁷ Longenecker et al., 2006, 154–5.

¹⁸ Morgan 2015, 281.

¹⁹ Downs and Lappenga 2019, 94–5.

By utilizing Morgan's explication of Paul drawing from the semantics of faith (πίστις) in relation to law (νόμος) from Galatians 2 and 3 whereby πίστις is Christ's faith to God and to humans and where humans "must trust in God through Christ and his actions,"²⁰ it is reasonable to read Gal 3:23 as Christ's faith, and vv.24-26 as Christ's faith making it possible for humans to have faith in him. In other words, because of the faithfulness of Christ, we are made children of God as we are "in Christ Jesus" (v.26). To be baptized into and clothed with Christ (v.27) then signifies, not only the candidate's decision of faith in Christ, but one's participation into the faithfulness of Jesus as witnessed in his death and resurrection. The phrase "as many of you" (v.27) affirms a communal, corporate element that all (children of God) who enter into what Christ has done are clothed with Christ. This corporate and participatory dimension of baptism challenges the traditional individualistic notion of faith. Here we see how a redefinition of faith also redefines baptism—baptism should be viewed as the incorporation of believers into what Christ has already done and into a multi-faceted trust relationship with God, Christ, and other human beings whereby "there is no longer Jew or Greek... all are one in Christ" (v.29).

Secondly, the definition of "baptized into Christ" should also be assessed. For Beasley-Murray, Ferguson, and Hartman, "into Christ" is an abbreviation of the baptismal formula "into the name of Christ Jesus" (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ),²¹ but for Dunn, the two are different. Dunn has argued in several works that "baptized in Christ" (βαπτίζεσθαι εἰς Χριστὸν) is a metaphor drawn from the rite of baptism to describe the entry of the believer into the spiritual relationship with Christ.²² We need, therefore, to consider if the verb "baptized" refers to a literal water baptism or a metaphorical meaning. Given Paul's unsystematic references to and treatment of baptism, I think it is possible that Paul did not always mean literal water baptism.

²⁰ Morgan 2015, 276.

²¹ Hartman 1997, 56; Ferguson 2009, 148; Beasley-Murray 1962, 128.

²² See e.g. Dunn 2010, 109.

A few verses later in Gal 4:5-6, Paul brings up the topic of sonship again (cf. 3:26). It repeats that the Galatians are sons, but the proof of sonship here is that “God sent the Spirit of his Son” into their hearts. Debbie Hunn explicates that the later pair of verses (4:5-6) function as a clarification for the first pair (3:26-27)—the proof of sonship that is described as baptism in 3:27 is expounded as the receiving of the Spirit of God’s Son.²³ This completes the argument Paul began in Gal 3:2 on the meaning of receiving the Spirit by faith; by having the Spirit it proved they were sons and heirs of God.²⁴

Whilst I think it is convincing to view baptism in Galatians 3 as Spirit baptism (not literal water baptism), it is beneficial to see if such a pattern is found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. A fair comparison would be to look at 1 Cor 12:13 where this verse and Gal 3:27 use the exact same verb for “was baptized” (third person singular in Gal 3:27, ἐβαπτίσθητε; first person plural in 1 Cor 12:13, ἐβαπτίσθημεν). In both cases, the verses eradicate distinctions between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, and both have no mention of a human agent of baptism.²⁵ The Spirit is mentioned in the beginning and end of 1 Cor 12:13, which affords baptism as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Given i) the similarities of Gal 3:27 with 1 Cor 12:13, ii) the link between Gal 3:27 with Gal 4:5-6, iii) the many πνεῦμα references in Galatians 3, and iv) the promise that the Galatians “might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (3:14), I think it is very likely that Paul meant for ἐβαπτίσθητε (3:27) to be understood as Spirit baptism. Anthony Cross argues for us to understand “baptism” in 12:13 as an example of synecdoche to make it possible for it to be both Spirit and water baptism. While Cross’ proposition should not be ruled out, I maintain, based on reasons above, that ἐβαπτίσθητε as Spirit baptism is more likely Paul’s principal interpretation.²⁶ Thus, what

²³ Hunn 2004, 374.

²⁴ Ibid., 374 n. 14.

²⁵ Witherington 2007, 82.

²⁶ Cross 2002, 144.

we find in Galatians 3 is not a correlation between faith and water baptism, but a clear link between Christ's faithfulness and human participation in his faith and the receiving of the Spirit as expressed in baptismal language.²⁷

Romans 6:3-4

If Gal 3:26-27 should be read metaphorically as Spirit baptism, how should baptism in Romans 6:3-4 be construed?

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

ἢ ἀγνοεῖτε ὅτι, ὅσοι ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθημεν; συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον, ἵνα ὥσπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν (Rom 6:3-4)

Dunn argues that like for Gal 3:27, we should also set Rom 6:3-4 alongside 1 Cor 12:13 and render the phrase “baptized into Christ Jesus” (ἐβαπτίσθημεν εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, Rom 6:3-4) as a metaphor too.²⁸ The first and only concrete reference to water baptism, according to Dunn, are in the words “by baptism into death” (διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον) in Rom 6:4, but it is also used in a metaphorical sense to relate baptism and burial as way of describing mystical union with Christ in his death.²⁹ However, it could be that

²⁷ When adopting James Dunn's view of baptism as metaphor, I am agreeing with his view that the literal (water) and metaphorical (spirit) are antithetical. I think the early readers understood the metaphor based on their image of the physical water baptism.

²⁸ Dunn 2010, 140.

²⁹ Ibid.

the major subject in Rom 6:1-14 is not baptism;³⁰ instead it is sin, death, law, grace, life, and/or other related themes. That Paul wrote “do you not know” (6:3) suggests the Romans already knew that baptism is equated with death and burial with Jesus. Nevertheless, others like Samuli Siikavirta would argue that baptism is central in Romans 6 in that the divine passives “remind Paul’s recipients of their baptismal identity in Christ.”³¹ I contend that whilst baptismal identity is probable, the dominant attention is not baptism itself but the spiritual reality of dying with Christ. Furthermore, Paul says nothing about humans who administer the rite,³² and immersion is a powerful symbol of burial so we could read baptism as Paul’s literary device.

Returning to the question of faith and baptism, Beasley-Murray assumes that the themes of grace and faith in Romans 5 are expressed in terms of baptism in Romans 6,³³ that is, the justifying work of Christ’s death in Rom 5:1ff is now seen in our baptism with Christ in 6:1ff. I agree only in that the reading of faith in Romans 5 is being expressed in the metaphorical baptism of dying to sin in Romans 6 and only in the sense of one’s participation in Christ’s faith (rather than purely a personal belief). Faith in Romans 5 is evidently demonstrated as Christ’s faith in how humans are justified by faith (5:1) through his blood and death (5:8-10), which is consistent with our (re)definition of faith in this essay. Morgan is certain that even though Paul does not call Christ a mediator in 5:1, he describes Jesus as such.³⁴ Even though the word faith (πίστις) only appears in the opening verse of the chapter, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith” (Δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως; 5:1),³⁵ the broader concept of faith—Christ’s πίστις as mediator—permeates

³⁰ Tappeiner 1977, 51.

³¹ Siikavirta 2015, 117.

³² Witherington 2007, 83.

³³ Beasley-Murray 1962, 137-8.

³⁴ Morgan 2015, 294.

³⁵ According to Metzger 1994, 452 it is doubtful whether τῇ πίστει belong to Rom 5:2 but the meaning is not changed by its presence or absence.

the chapter, bringing salvation and reconciliation for humans (5:10-11).

Owing to the participatory nature of our faith into Christ's πίστις, we can say that because "Christ died for us" (5:8), we are able to be "baptized into his death" (6:3). The consecutive use of aorist tenses in 6:2-4 further accentuates the very real participation and relationship of the believer to Christ: "we died to sin" (6:2); "baptized into his death" (6:3); "buried with him" (6:4). In Morna Hooker's explication, this participation is possible primarily because of the faith of Christ— "we share in it only because we are in him. This faith is possible only because it is a sharing in his."³⁶ Within the narrower definition of faith, human trust would likely be limited to Rom 5:1 only, but a broader view of Christ's faithfulness provides a coherent reading of Romans 5 and a robust link and explanation of how faith is the means and context to understand Paul's baptismal language. In this way, Morgan's "tripartite faith" precedes baptism (as metaphor), not the water rite.

Excursus: Romans 6:8 and 10:8-10

One might argue that the πιστ- word group reappears in Rom 6:8 (πιστεύομεν) and since v.8 ("we have died with Christ... we will also live with him") looks back to v.4 ("we have been buried with him... we too might walk in newness of life"), and because of their similarities, faith is related to baptism. If we read the protasis of v.8 ("we have died with Christ") in light of v.4 ("we have been buried with him by baptism"), we equate death with baptism. With this reading, the apodosis of the conditional sentence in v.8 ("we believe that we will also live with him") is understood as: if we are baptized in Christ, then we believe we will also live with him. In this manner, faith becomes a *consequence* of baptism, instead of *prerequisite*.³⁷

³⁶ Hooker 2016, 62.

³⁷ The possibility of faith proceeding from baptism is not uncommon and unknown. Whilst some Christian traditions understand faith as symbolised by baptism or demonstrated by

Another passage in the letter to the Romans that is worth mentioning is Rom 10:8-10. Scholars like Dunn think it is an explicit expression of faith and confession that was written within a context of baptism.³⁸ David Stanley considers Eph 5:25-26 as the “matter and form” of baptism, so, he links “the washing of water by the word” (τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι, Eph 5:26) to i) “the word of faith that we proclaim” (τὸ ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως ὃ κηρύσσομεν, (Rom 10:8; it denotes the profession of faith that “Jesus is Lord”) as well as to ii) “tasted the goodness of the word of God” (καλὸν γευσσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα, Heb 6:5; a description of a neophyte at his baptism).³⁹ Stanley concludes that ῥῆμα is the ordinary expression for the baptismal profession of faith. Similarly, Everett Ferguson observes that a reference to the resurrection in Rom 6:4 occurs with the confession of faith in Rom 10:9-10, and the phrase “no distinction between Jew and Gentile” (Rom 10:12) is akin to the baptismal language in Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 12:13.⁴⁰ In my opinion, these scholars too easily assume a water baptismal context with no further qualification. In the words of William Hull, these are instances when “cumulative exegesis of baptismal passages are lifted out of their original settings and strung together [and] the effect is very different from a reading of each NT document separately with an eye to the importance which baptism had within it”.⁴¹ Also, Heb 6:5 is not a neophyte at baptism because φωτισθέντας (6:4) is not referring to baptism but to illumination, and Ferguson’s phrases from baptismal texts that are analogous to Rom 10:9-10 are also found in other writings that are not related to baptism. A baptismal rite may not have been intended by Paul nor assumed by the Romans, who likely did not have the other epistles as cross-references.

baptism, others see faith as something given as a gift in baptism or view baptism as that which calls people to faith.

³⁸ Dunn 2010, 150.

³⁹ Stanley 1957, 213-4.

⁴⁰ Ferguson 2009, 158.

⁴¹ Hull 1968, 10.

Colossians 2:12

It is commonly said that Col 2:12 makes explicit the connection of baptism to resurrection that Rom 6:3-4 only implied.

when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead

συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ, ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνεγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (Col 2:12)

Here not only is one buried with Christ in baptism but is also raised with him through faith—the words “you were also raised with him through faith” (ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνεγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως, v.12b) refers to the preceding baptism (βαπτισμῷ, v.12a). This way, “baptism is a confession of faith in the resurrection of Jesus by God,” who not only raised Christ but also the one baptized.⁴² If so, there is close correlation between baptism and faith, as well as baptism as death and resurrection.

We return temporarily to Romans 6 for a comparative study, as Col 2:12 is akin to Rom 6:8 (that looks back to 6:4)—both are about dying with Jesus in baptism and being raised with Jesus through faith. For Romans 6, I argued above that baptism’s only connection is with death and burial (6:4a) because in 6:4b Paul does not say that in baptism we are also raised with Christ (as some expect and even assume); the resurrection of Christians is described with the intentional use of the future tense in the verbs of Rom 6:5 and 6:8.⁴³ Likewise, Gardner’s study of Col 2:12 shows that to be “buried with” (συνταφέντες) and “raised with” (συνεγέρθητε) are not συν-parallels implying *a priori* that Paul’s use of “with him” ἐν ᾧ (v.12b) refers to baptism; in fact resurrection with Christ “is deliberately separated from the rite of baptism.”⁴⁴

⁴² Ferguson 2009, 160.

⁴³ Carlson 1993, 258.

⁴⁴ Gardner 1983, 173, 176.

Given the context of Colossians 2, ἐν ᾧ refers to the key idea of being “in Christ” rather than baptism.⁴⁵ Paul is careful to point out that the means to be “raised with him” is by faith and God’s power, not baptism. The point of this discussion is not to break up Paul’s sentences or split up burial and resurrection, but to highlight that a closer reading of these verses demonstrates a consistent correlation of baptism with burial and faith with resurrection. Its direct contribution to this essay’s faith-baptism question is to show that faith is not directly related to baptism even when both terms appear in the same sentence.

Thus, the distinction in Romans 6 between baptism and resurrection/faith should also be maintained in Colossians 2—baptism is seen in terms of Christ’s death, and resurrection is seen in the context of faith. Witherington, thus, argues that baptism “depicts the work of God in the life of the person, such that the old sinful nature dies. Baptism does not depict our faith response to that work of God, rather what precedes and enables it.”⁴⁶ I partially agree in that Paul does not present baptism as a faith response, but just because ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ appears before διὰ τῆς πίστεως does not qualify baptism preceding and enabling faith.

From the above Pauline passages, Paul never explicitly spells out the precise relationship between faith and baptism.⁴⁷ Otfried Hofius, in his study of *Glaube und Taufe*, argues that it is neither a demonstration of faith nor an act of confession by the baptismal candidate.⁴⁸ Dunn writes, “I am persuaded, though not without some hesitation, that we should take διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος

⁴⁵ Ibid., 174–5.

⁴⁶ Witherington 2007, 85.

⁴⁷ A longer study of the reception of Paul will also require looking at how the ‘Lukan Paul’ is portrayed in Acts in relation to his own baptism, household baptisms, the re-baptism of John’s disciples, etc. However, this is not the particular project of this essay; this essay is primarily interested in Paul’s own writings on baptism and faith.

⁴⁸ „sie ist deshalb ihrem Wesen nach weder eine Demonstration des Glaubens noch ein Bekenntnisakt des Täuflings;“ Hofius 1994, 150.

as describing the believer's submission of faith to the action of God."⁴⁹ I think Dunn is right to hesitate because it is something we can at best surmise without clear evidence since Paul is known to offer "scattered allusions"⁵⁰ when it comes to baptism.⁵¹

Concluding Thoughts on Paul

I have devoted a considerable amount of space to examining Paul's writings. When contemporary Christians think about baptism, they rely heavily on Biblical texts, which are often Paul's letters (since Paul offers the most content on baptism in the NT); thus, I see the need to scrutinize Paul's thoughts on baptism. Our findings prevent us from assuming and prescribing a straightforward relationship between one's profession of faith and water baptism. The three passages discussed above at best allude to a link between faith and water baptism; I have argued that they more convincingly demonstrate baptism as metaphor without a decisive word about whether faith must precede water baptism. Would the early church documents demonstrate more evident faith-baptism correlation? It is to this question that we now turn.

Baptism and Faith in the Early Church

In this section, we will look at mentions of and discussions about baptism in documents from as early as the first-century *Didache* to the early third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Traditio Apostolica* (including other relevant material like Acts 8:37 and an excerpt from Tertullian).

⁴⁹ Dunn 2010, 145.

⁵⁰ Taylor 2017, xvii.

⁵¹ Heb 6:1-2 has featured in faith-baptism debates as providing a temporal sequence that begins at repentance, moves on to faith, and then to baptism. However, neither the context between the items nor the succession in time is stressed in the verses. Also, Paul is the focus of this study, and, in my opinion, Hebrews does not fall within the Pauline corpus.

Didache

Given the early dating of the *Didache*, this document would have been contemporaneous with Paul's letters.⁵² If my above arguments about Paul's view on faith and baptism are right, then it is perhaps unsurprising that the *Didache* in its baptism section (*Did.* 7.1-4) contains no reference at all to a teaching about or profession of faith. The opening sentence to the chapter on baptism, "as for baptism, baptize in this way, having said all this beforehand" (περὶ δὲ τοῦ βαπτίσματος, οὕτω βαπτίσατε ταῦτα πάντα προειπόντες, *Did.* 7.1), refers to *Didache* 1-6. The things that have been said beforehand (προειπόντες) would point to the early sections known as the "Two Ways", a set of two alternative ethical values of life or death, which assumes a particular function to prepare catechumens for baptism.⁵³ Michael Holmes calls it "the Christianization of a common Jewish form of moral instruction."⁵⁴ Shawn Wilhite adds, "a catechumen performs the Two Ways as prerequisite for baptism."⁵⁵ Therefore, it appears that the *Didache's* baptismal preparation is principally ethical in character. Unlike some of the documents we will see below, the *Didache* "contains no reference at all to a profession of faith" before baptism.⁵⁶

Acts 8:37 Insertion

Before looking at the early third-century documents, it is pertinent to pause at a late second-century insertion in Acts 8. Based on extant literature, the clearest and earliest profession of faith before baptism appears in Acts 8:37 of

⁵² There is broad consensus in current scholarship that dates the *Didache* to the first century. See O'Loughlin 2010, 26 for a discussion on whether it might be written in c.50 AD or 80-90 AD. This places the *Didache* within the same time frame as Paul's letters.

⁵³ Wilhite 2019, 99, 167.

⁵⁴ Holmes 2006, 142.

⁵⁵ Wilhite 2019, 168.

⁵⁶ Bradshaw 2009, 62.

the Western addition:

And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”.

εἶπε δὲ ὁ Φίλιππος, Εἰ πιστεύεις ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας, ἔξεστιν. ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ εἶπε, Πιστεύω τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ εἶναι τὸν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν. (Acts 8:37, not found in P45, P75, & A B C, etc.)

In Bruce Metzger’s view this insertion seems to suggest that Philip may not have baptized the Ethiopian without confirming a confession of faith—it needed to be recorded and expressed in the story.⁵⁷ It is estimated that the tradition of the Ethiopian’s declaration of faith is known by the latter part of the second century because Irenaeus quotes part of it: “the believing eunuch himself: and, immediately requesting to be baptized, he said, “I believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God” (*Against Heresies* 3.12.8).⁵⁸ I infer from the timing of Irenaeus’ quote that it became more common and necessary in the latter half of the second century to require a confession of faith before the act of water baptism. This could be because the church had grown to a size that required clearer orders and standard practices, especially for an initiation rite like baptism.

Tertullian’s De spectaculis

Slightly later, towards the end of the second century and first half of the third century, we find mentions of the profession of faith in Tertullian’s work. He wrote, “When we enter the water (*Cum aquam ingress*) and profess the Christian faith in the terms prescribed by its law (*Christianam fidem in legis suae verba profitemur*), we profess with our mouths that we have renounced

⁵⁷ Metzger 1994, 315-6.

⁵⁸ Trans. *ANF* 1:433.

the devil, his pomp and his angels” (*De spectaculis* 4.1).⁵⁹ It should be noted that *De spectaculis* was written as a moral and ascetic treatise, and not a liturgical document. Besides Tertullian, one can find other mentions of faith with baptism from early to mid-third-century literature in Wolfram’s Kinzig collection of early creeds—he has compiled direct and indirect evidence of faith in baptism by Tertullian, Caecilius of Biltha, Pseudo-Cyprian, Dionysius of Alexandria, etc.⁶⁰ Their mentions are brief, but they affirm the general correlation between faith and baptism in the third century.

Didascalia Apostolorum and Traditio Apostolica

Two early third century works (*Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Traditio Apostolica*) should also be highlighted, as they both have mentions of faith before baptism. In the ancient Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum*, the profession of faith did not originally occur in close conjunction with the moment of immersion but appears to take place some time before. When the heathens promise to repent and to say “we believe”, they are allowed to join the congregation to hear the word (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 10).⁶¹ Only after a period of time of observing the heathens’ fruit of repentance is baptism mentioned (towards the end of the paragraph). There are many reminders about repentance and rejection of sin but only one mention of “we believe” before the discussion on baptism occurs, which suggests that one’s repentant behaviour and choices take precedence over one’s profession of belief before baptism. Therefore, though the profession of faith does precede baptism, it seems to be more directly related to the allowance of a person to join the Christian community and to enter into a period of repentance than it is to baptism.

As for the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, the baptismal rite involved a three-

⁵⁹ LCL 250 242-253.

⁶⁰ See Kinzig 2017, 147-152.

⁶¹ Trans Gibson 1903, 55. Bradshaw 2009, 55, 72.

fold response by the candidate to questions of belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each confession was followed by an immersion, totalling a three-fold immersion (*Traditio Apostolica* 21.11-18).⁶² This is the clearest liturgical source we have on baptismal practice in the third century, and there is a clear record of answers to questions of belief before immersion. Interestingly, however, in the *Apostolic Tradition*, as may have also been the case in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, candidates were allowed to hear “the Gospel” in the final stages of their baptism preparations *only after* an examination of their conduct (rather than an examination or profession of their faith).⁶³ Paul Bradshaw comments that while the sequence for today’s modern church is “believing first, belonging second, behaving third... it was behaving that was the prerequisite to belonging in the early Church, and that at least some believing might have been expected to come later.”⁶⁴ I suspect that behaving before belonging and believing is not overly surprising because in the pre-Constantinian era, the early church had to be careful of outside threats (like spies) and, so, needed to ensure loyalty and commitment to the Christian faith their behaviour.

Concluding Thoughts from the Early Church

Our findings from the above analyses suggest that there is no clear evidence of faith as prerequisite for baptism until the latter part of the second century (in the Acts 8:37 insertion).⁶⁵ Using the (re)defined understanding of faith, one might argue that the “Two Ways” in the *Didache* is the external, ethical expression of faith. However, the first appearance of πίστις (whether lexeme or concept) is in the Eucharist section (*Did* 10.2). It could be that faith and

⁶² Kinzig 2017, 154-161 presents Gregory Dix's and Bernard Botte's reconstructions as well as the Latin and Greek texts of the *Traditio*.

⁶³ Bradshaw 2009, 56, 66. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* had ethical demands on candidates before they professed repentance and faith.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶⁵ Like Acts 8:37, the longer ending of Mark 16:6 could also prove a faith-baptism correlation in the second century.

baptism (*Did* 9.5) are requirements to partake of the Eucharist, but it does not document a sequence or direct relationship between faith and baptism. The baptismal fast in *Did* 7.4 is unclear whether the need to fast offers us further insight to the teaching of faith.⁶⁶ Hence, the total absence of πίστις prior to and in the baptism section cautions against arguments for the Two Ways as the external expression of faith. Moreover, we should not forget that the *Didache* is “entirely aimed at practical needs and lacks any theoretical or even speculative exposition of Christian belief.”⁶⁷ Given the arguments from silence and the genre of this document, there is room for debate, but I am inclined to posit that at the point of *Did.* 7.1, the author(s) appears to refer to ethical instructions and is not concerned about the requirement of faith for the water rite.⁶⁸ In other words, the presence of faith as action and relationship is evident in the *Didache* but not in relation to water baptism.

On the other hand, I think that the *Apostolic Tradition* and *Didascalia Apostolorum* support the “external-relational shift” definition of faith. The emphasis on behavior and conduct in these documents indicate that faith is not only an interior belief but is rooted in relationships, and expressed in action, behavior, and way of life.⁶⁹ In summary, I argue that the ambiguity in the *Didache* is not evidence for the declaration of faith before baptism. As for the brief record of Acts 8:37 and single sentence from Tertullian, I think they suggest that the profession of faith became more common towards the third century, though they are not sufficient evidence for robust arguments about faith and baptism. It is the early third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *Traditio Apostolica* that ostensibly demonstrate the prerequisites for baptism in precisely the external and relational aspects that scholars in recent years are defining, while preserving the need for the candidate to profess their decision

⁶⁶ Wilhite 2019, 67.

⁶⁷ Niederwimmer 1998, 2.

⁶⁸ A similar impression is found in the Qumran’s Community Rule 1QS 3.6-9 where ‘faith’ is not mentioned per se but ethical requirements are noted in 4.2ff. However, we are not certain if it influenced Paul’s thought on faith-baptism in any way.

⁶⁹ Bates 2020, 186-7.

of placing human faith in God.⁷⁰

Conclusion: What is the Faith-Baptism Link(s) in Paul and the Early Church?

We are now prepared to answer the questions of whether faith was a necessary prerequisite for baptism and if Pauline baptismal passages share similarities on the matter with the earliest church documents. From Paul, we discover that even when the words “faith” and “baptism” appear in close proximity, their correlation is arguable. On water baptism, we do not know for certain that faith was not a prerequisite. Our investigation has shown no clear evidence that faith—human trust (including outward conduct) in the faithfulness of Christ—was a necessary prerequisite for water baptism for Paul. We do not know if the lack of evidence for faith in Paul may have in any way influenced the similar lack of it in the *Didache*, but the faith requirement is only clear from Acts 8:37 and third-century literature. This paper is in no way against a believer's good confession (1 Tim 6:12; Rom 10:8-10)⁷¹ before baptism; it simply seeks to present that there is no clear evidence for faith as prerequisite for water baptism in the first and early second century.

Moreover, the study has shown that a linear development between faith and baptism cannot be discerned between Paul's letters and the early church documents. The later literature, being in themselves written for liturgical and ecclesiastical praxis, do not address the same baptismal realities found in the Pauline contexts that were not concerned about the ritual practice of baptism in the same way. The use of “faith” language also differs in each. Owing to the genre of the early church documents, we are confined to understand faith

⁷⁰ Edsall 2019, 57 observes that from the *Didache* and Shepherd of Hermas through Cyril of Jerusalem and John Chrysostom (first four centuries), moral issues were a central concern in baptism, but a discussion is beyond the space constraints here.

⁷¹ In 1 Tim 6:12, there is no indication that the confession made in public before other witnesses is referring to baptism, therefore, I do not rely on this verse to make arguments about baptism and the confession of faith.

primarily as confession whereas in Paul, as we have seen, faith is expounded more broadly and theologically. While it would be satisfying to line the evidence together into a coherent picture of sequence and development from Paul through the *Didache* to the third-century, it is only true to the evidence to conclude that we have found instead three snapshots of faith in relation to water baptism: i) Paul not clearly stating faith as prerequisite; ii) the *Didache* not lining up with the later documents; iii) third-century documents (*Apostolic Tradition* and *Didascalia Apostolorum*) requiring a public confession of faith that does not exist beforehand. As for how the later textual traditions connect with and contribute to Paul may be an unsolvable mystery or an opportunity for further investigation. This finding in no way suggests mere discontinuity between Paul's letters, the *Didache*, and third-century writings, because the later works do develop and clarify the ritual of baptism from the earlier ones. It is, nonetheless, only fair to report that a smooth and coherent continuity between faith and baptism is not found.

In conclusion, there is no clear evidence in Paul and the early church that faith was a necessary prerequisite for water baptism until the Acts 8:37 insertion in the late second century and in third-century literature, but faith is required to precede baptism in order to understand and validate baptism as metaphor. Again, I must clarify that this essay does not oppose a candidate's confession of faith before baptism; nevertheless, I argue that it is not Paul's primary meaning or intention in his letters when faith and baptism are mentioned. The findings in this essay and the recent redefinition of faith have caused us to rethink the role of a profession of faith in baptismal liturgies, which could offer fruitful discussion in disability studies,⁷² as well as produce

⁷² There is potential for much wider and deeper discussions on the topic of baptism and disability, which will hopefully be explored in future research projects. I argue that the faint faith-baptism links in Paul's letters can serve as favourable foundation and constructive discussion for topics at the intersection of biblical, liturgical, and disability studies. This includes exploring solutions to dilemmas about what to do when the candidate is unable to respond or ascertain their state of faith, as in the case of non-speaking autistic people or others with profound learning disabilities or multiple developmental disabilities. If the need for a profession of faith is not mandatory, then those with disabilities can be baptized without making their own declaration of faith.

new academic, homiletical, and pastoral implications.

Received: Dec. 11, 2025; Revised: Dec. 11, 2025; Accepted: Dec. 28, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23364/JBAS.2025.1.1.55816>

Bibliography

Alule, Cosmas. *Baptism and Faith: Their Relationship in Our Salvific Encounter with God Today in the Light of the New Testament Baptismal Theology and Vatican II Sacramental Theology*. European University Studies Ser. 23, Theology Vol. 700. New York: Lang, 2000.

Gibson, Margaret Dunlop. *The Didascalia Apostolorum in English*. Translated from the Syriac. London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1903.

Bates, Matthew W. "The External-Relational Shift in Faith (Pistis) in New Testament Research: Romans 1 as Gospel-Allegiance Test Case." *Currents in Biblical Research* 18, no. 2 (February 2020): 176–202.

Beasley-Murray, George Raymond. *Baptism in the New Testament*. London: Macmillan, 1962.

Bradshaw, Paul. *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*. London, England: SPCK, 2009.

Carlson, Richard Paul. "The Role of Baptism in Paul's Thought." *Interpretation* 47, no. 3 (July 1993): 255–266.

Cross, Anthony R. "Spirit- and Water-Baptism in 1 Cor 12.13." In *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, 120–148. Journal for the Study of the New Testament 234. London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

Denney, James. *The Death of Christ*. London: Tyndale Press, 1951.

Downs, David J., and Benjamin J. Lappenga. *The Faithfulness of the Risen Christ: Pistis and the Exalted Lord in the Pauline Letters*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019.

Dunn, James D. G. "Baptism and the Unity of the Church in the New Testament." In *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*. Edited by Michael Root and Risto Saarinen, 78–103. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Dunn, James D. G. *Baptism in the Holy Spirit : A Re-Examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today*. 2nd ed. London: SCM Press, 2010.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998.

Edsall, Benjamin A. *The Reception of Paul and Early Christian Initiation: History and Hermeneutics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Ferguson, Everett. *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

Gardner, Paul D. “‘Circumcised in Baptism - Raised through Faith’: A Note on Col 2:11-12.” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (1983): 172–177.

George, Timothy. *Galatians*. The New American Commentary, vol. 30. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.

Gupta, Nijay K. *Paul and the Language of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.

Hartman, Lars. *'Into the Name of the Lord Jesus': Baptism in the Early Church*. Studies of the New Testament and its World. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997.

Hofius, Otfried. “Glaube Und Taufe Nach Dem Zeugnis Des Neuen Testaments.” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 91, no. 2 (1994): 134–156.

Holmes, Michael W. *The Apostolic Fathers in English*. Translated by J. B Lightfoot and J. R Harmer. 3rd ed. Apostolic Fathers. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

Hooker, Morna D. “Another Look at Πίστις Χριστοῦ.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69, no. 1 (2016): 46–62.

Hull, William E. “Baptism in the New Testament: A Hermeneutical Critique.” *Review & Expositor* 65, no. 1 (February 1968): 3–12.

Hunn, Debbie. “The Baptism of Galatians 3:27: A Contextual Approach.” *The Expository Times* 115, no. 11 (August 2004): 372–375.

Kinzig, Wolfram. *Faith in Formulae: A Collection of Early Christian Creeds and Creed-Related Texts*. 4 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Lane, William L., *Hebrews 1 - 8*. Word Biblical Commentary 47A. Nashville: Nelson, 2009.

Longenecker, Richard N., *Galatians*. Word Biblical Commentary 41. Waco, TX: Word, 2006.

Metzger, Bruce M, United Bible Societies. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament; A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)*. London: United Bible Societies, 1994.

Morgan, Teresa. *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Morgan, Teresa. "The Invention of Faith: pistis and fides in early churches and the later Roman empire." <https://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/invention-faith-pistis-and-fides-early-churches-and-later-roman-empire>

Niederwimmer, Kurt. *The Didache: A Commentary*. Hermeneia--A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Edited by Harold W. Attridge. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1998.

Siikavirta, Samuli. *Baptism and Cognition in Romans 6-8 Paul's Ethics beyond "Indicative" and "Imperative."* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015.

Stanley, David Michael. "The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism: An Essay in Biblical Theology." *Theological Studies* 18, no. 2 (June 1957): 169–215.

Tappeiner, Daniel A. "Hermeneutics, the Analogy of Faith and New Testament Sacramental Realism." *The Evangelical Quarterly* 49 (January 1977): 40–52.

Taylor, Nicholas. *Paul on Baptism: Theology, Mission and Ministry in Context*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017.

Wilhite, Shawn J. *The Didache: A Commentary*. Apostolic Fathers Commentary Series. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019.

Witherington, Ben. *Troubled Waters: The Real New Testament Theology of Baptism*. Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2007.

Tertullian, Minucius Felix. *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*. Translated by T. R. Glover, Gerald H. Rendall. Loeb Classical Library 250. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931.

Thomas O'Loughlin. *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Baker Academic, 2010.

Wright, David F. "The Origins of Infant Baptism – Child Believers' Baptism?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 1–23.

Wright, David F. "How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism in the Early Church?" in *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley*. Edited by James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 45–63.

Wright, David F. "At What Ages were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?" *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997): 389–94.