



What is baptism?

CrossPointe has a “two-handed” theology, which holds essential doctrines in a closed fist and non-essential doctrines in an open hand. By this, we mean that some doctrinal stances are essential according to biblically orthodox Christianity (i.e., the Trinity; Jesus’ deity, virgin birth, sinless life, death for sin, and resurrection; the authority of the Bible; salvation by grace through faith in Jesus alone; etc.). Others are non-essential, because they stem from secondary issues which CrossPointe holds in an “open hand.” A person’s salvation does not depend on a particular stance concerning these issues.

Baptism is an “open-handed” doctrine at CrossPointe. We allow for disagreement and will not break fellowship over it.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). Baptism is a physical means of retelling the gospel.

Consider that Jesus was crucified in the sinner’s place, absorbing God’s wrath and destroying sin’s power. Friday, he was buried in a tomb sealed with an enormous stone and guarded by Roman soldiers. But Sunday morning, Jesus had risen from death and escaped the tomb!

He wasn’t the only one who received a new life that day.

Christians have died with Jesus and likewise have risen to new life. Second Corinthians 5:17 makes this clear: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Men and women are naturally slaves to sinful desires, “the flesh.” For Christians, this life of slavery is called the “old self,” because it was crucified with Jesus.

Those who have received the truth that Jesus died in their place and for their sins have historically demonstrated their faith through water baptism. Those saved by Jesus’ work plunge under water to identify with Jesus, who died and was buried, and as they emerge from the water they identify with Jesus’ resurrection to new life.

In addition to proclaiming Jesus’ and the sinner’s death and resurrection, baptism represents cleansing because of the water. The Greek word *baptizo* is often used to describe hand-washing in the New Testament and non-biblical Greek writings. Paul recalled the words that his mentor, Ananias, said when Paul first believed in Jesus the Savior, “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). Baptism, then, represents Jesus’ work of cleansing men and women from sin’s stain.

Having established baptism’s meaning, why should Christians be baptized?

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he commanded his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20a). Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, so those under the Savior’s authority obey his command to baptize and be baptized.

Also, Jesus' command indicates that baptism and teaching are crucial in the disciple-making process. Teaching Jesus' words seems obvious, but why is baptism necessary? As has already been observed, baptism, particularly full immersion under water, is a vivid representation of the gospel. Baptism clearly proclaims the gospel to those who witness it. And if a Christian has recently put his trust in Jesus, what better way to start proclaiming the gospel than baptism!

Jesus himself was baptized. Matthew wrote, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented" (Matt. 3:13-15). Several questions surround the purpose of Jesus' baptism, since he didn't need to be cleansed from sin. Regardless, Jesus was baptized before he began his public ministry, and a student is no greater than his teacher. Christians follow Jesus' example in baptism.

Baptism also identifies Christians with the body of Christ. Paul explains the things Christians hold in common in Ephesians 4:4-6, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Members of Christ's body, the Church, have the privilege of sharing the things which have been purchased by Jesus' blood. Like a family that shares house-keys, meals, or the computer, the Church shares baptism as one of the many things Jesus gives his people.

First Corinthians elaborates, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12-13). Baptism into Christ unites all Christians regardless of background. Believers hold their Savior in common, and the common symbol of baptism demonstrates to all Christians the same salvation provided by Christ's death and resurrection.

To clarify, baptism is not necessary for salvation. The thief who died next to Jesus entered paradise that day without being baptized (Luke 23:43). Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians clearly state that justification, or declared innocence, before God comes through faith alone. The Protestant Reformation was built on the truth that Christians are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Baptism does not save anyone. Jesus does.

However, the Bible has no category for un-baptized believers. Apparently, baptism was assumed when referring to believers saved by Jesus' blood. Baptism is not a work of salvation but a work of obedience to Jesus, who was baptized himself, commanded his disciples to do the same, and unites all believers through baptism in his body, the Church.

The New Testament cites several examples of water baptism following the belief necessary for salvation. One should be a born-again Christian before being baptized, according to Acts 2:38, which reads, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." While this is a command for repentance and baptism, it does not suggest that baptism should precede belief or repentance. Rather, baptism works alongside repentance to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ.

Does CrossPointe baptize children or infants?

Baptism, then, is naturally a command only for those who believe the gospel. Because CrossPointe adheres to "believer's baptism," we don't baptize infants or children incapable of demonstrating belief in the gospel. However, we do baptize children who have experienced the new life Jesus has bought, otherwise known as "regeneration," and who can understand and explain their salvation and their baptism's meaning. This maturity, of course, differs from child to child, so we leave it to the parents and

CrossPointe's elders to determine whether the child has received Christ, made a profession of faith, and is ready to be baptized.

While we won't baptize infants or unsaved children, we do practice dedication, in which a new child's parents publicly commit to parent that child in the Lord. It is similar to Hannah's dedication of her son, Samuel, to God, as recorded in First Samuel 1. However, it is not baptism, unless the child has demonstrated saving faith in the gospel.

How does CrossPointe conduct baptism?

At CrossPointe, we baptize the same way Jesus and the early Christians are recorded to have baptized: full immersion in water. The Bible clearly presents this. See Matthew 3:13-17 and Acts 8:36-39 for examples.

Furthermore, CrossPointe does not hold that only vocational ministers or pastors can baptize. All Christians are permitted to baptize other Christians. In fact, we encourage the spiritual leader of each household to consider administering his family's baptisms (1 Peter 2:9).

Finally, if a person has been baptized before becoming a truly born-again regenerate Christian, he may certainly be baptized again if he chooses.

Conclusion

Jesus ordained baptism as a visual expression of the gospel. Thus, baptism cannot save anyone, infant or adult, but, instead, it serves to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has saved his people from sin and commands them to demonstrate this salvation through baptism in his name.

Additional Biblical References:

- Matthew—3:6, 11, 13-14, 16; 21:25
- Mark—1:4-5, 8-9; 10:38-39; 11:30; 16:16
- Luke—3:3, 7, 12, 16, 21; 7:29-30; 12:50; 20:4
- John—1:26, 33; 3:23; 4:2; 13:8, 10
- Acts—1:5, 22; 2:38, 41; 8:12-13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:37, 48; 11:16; 13:24; 16:15, 33; 18:8, 25; 19:3-5; 22:16
- Romans—6:3-4
- 1 Corinthians—1:13-17; 6:11; 10:2; 12:13; 15:29
- Galatians—3:27
- Ephesians—4:5; 5:26
- Colossians—2:12
- Titus—3:5
- Hebrews—6:2; 10:22
- 1 Peter—3:21

Further Reading

Books

- *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears (Crossway Publishers), especially chapter 5.
- *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* by Everett Ferguson (Eerdmans Publishing).
- *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem (Zondervan), especially chapters 39 and 49.

Internet

- "Baptism and the Unity of Christians" by Tom Wells (http://theresurgence.com/tom_wells_1999-07_baptism_and_the_unity_of_christians).

- “Infant Baptism and the New Covenant Community” by John Piper
(http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByTopic/23/1500_Infant_Baptism_and_the_New_Covenant_Community/).
- Sermons on baptism by John Piper
(<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByTopic/23/>).