

Baptism: Some Common Questions Answered

Baptism is an important topic that also arouses much controversy and confusion. The decisive issue is, *what does the Bible teach?* I want to answer from the Bible some common questions about baptism. If you have a different understanding, I simply encourage you to study the Bible for yourself to see what it teaches (see [Acts 17:11](#)). Scripture alone, not church tradition, is our authoritative standard.

1. Why is baptism important?

Baptism is important because Christ commanded it as a part of the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” ([Matt. 28:19](#)). If we neglect baptism, we’re disobeying our Lord. Since true faith always expresses itself in obedience, those who have believed in Christ and have been properly instructed about baptism will obey Christ by being baptized.

Baptism is the place where a believer publicly confesses Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and identifies with Christ and His church. In talking of our need to follow Him, Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.... For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” ([Mark 8:34, 38](#)). Baptism is the initial way of confessing Christ publicly.

2. What is the meaning of baptism?

The word “baptism” is simply a transliteration of the Greek word, *baptisma*, and some related words which have the meaning of dipping or immersing. Since the object dipped or immersed became totally identified with the substance in which it was placed, the idea of *identification* is central to the meaning of baptism. Jesus’ baptism by John publicly identified Him who was sinless with sinners in anticipation of His death and resurrection as their sin-bearer. In that sense, He referred to His own impending death as a “baptism” which He had to undergo ([Mark 10:38-39](#); [Luke 12:50](#)). For us baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection; our identification with Christ’s church; and, our cleansing from sin.

A) BAPTISM SYMBOLIZES TOTAL IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST IN HIS DEATH, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION.

This is Paul's point in [Romans 6:3-4](#): "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Technically, we were "baptized into Christ" through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the work whereby the Holy Spirit places a person "in Christ" at the moment of salvation. So what Paul refers to in [Romans 6](#) is not water baptism itself, but what it pictures, namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At the instant we believed, we became totally identified with Christ. His death became our death, His burial our burial, His resurrection our resurrection. Going under the water symbolizes death to our old way of life; coming up out of the water pictures the beginning of a new life, lived unto God, in the power of Christ's resurrection (see also, [Col. 2:11-12](#)).

B) BAPTISM SYMBOLIZES OUR IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST'S CHURCH.

In [1 Corinthians 12:13](#), Paul states, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The primary reference here, as in [Romans 6](#), is to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, when He places the believer into Christ at the moment of salvation. We become members of His body, the church. Water baptism symbolizes our identification with the church which took place spiritually at the moment of saving faith.

In the act of baptism, a person publicly identifies himself with other Christians. He is saying, "Now I'm one of them." In our culture, with religious tolerance, water baptism isn't too threatening. But in some countries, where Christians are persecuted, baptism separates the true believers from the phonies. You open yourself to persecution by being baptized. But even if we don't risk persecution, baptism should represent that sort of bold, public identification with the church.

C) BAPTISM SYMBOLIZES CLEANSING FROM SIN.

This is the point of [1 Peter 3:18-21](#) (see below also) plus several other Scriptures. Cleansing is obviously a primary symbol of water. But it is not immersion in water (or sprinkling, pouring, or whatever mode) that cleanses the heart. Peter makes that very clear. Water can only remove dirt from the flesh. It is the blood of Christ which removes the filth from our hearts, because apart from the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins ([Heb. 9:22](#)).

Because baptism is done with water, and water symbolizes cleansing, it is often mentioned in close connection with salvation. In [Titus 3:5](#), Paul refers to God's saving us "by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." But in the immediately preceding words he says that God saved us "not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness." The act of baptism cannot save anyone. We are saved only God's grace through faith in Christ ([Eph. 2:8, 9](#)). After Saul had been blinded on the Damascus road, Ananias came to him and said, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling upon His name" ([Acts 22:16](#)).

The Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon (*Spurgeon's Sermons* [Baker], 8:31), has a helpful comment in this connection:

I know that believer's baptism itself does not wash away sin, yet it is so the outward sign and emblem of it to the believer, that the thing visible may be described as the thing signified. Just as our Saviour said, "This is my body," when it was not his body, but bread; yet, inasmuch as it represented his body, it was fair and right according to the usage of language to say, "Take, eat, this is my body." And so, inasmuch as baptism to the believer represent[s] the washing of sin—it may be called the washing of sin; not that it is so, but that it is to saved souls the outward symbol and representation of what is done by the power of the Holy Spirit in the man who believes in Christ.

This raises a third question that deserves more discussion:

3. Is baptism necessary for salvation?

The overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that salvation is by grace through faith alone ([Eph. 2:8-9](#)). Both Romans and Galatians deal extensively with the theme that we are justified (declared righteous by God) through faith in Jesus Christ, not by any works of righteousness. Many Scriptures affirm what Jesus stated, "... he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" ([John 5:24](#)). He told the dying thief on the cross, who called out to Him in faith, that he would be with Him that very day in Paradise ([Luke 23:39-43](#)). Obviously, the man was not baptized.

At the same time, Scripture is clear that genuine saving faith results in obedience ([Eph. 2:10](#); [2 Thess. 1:8](#), "obey the gospel"). Thus every true believer who is properly taught and who has opportunity will be baptized in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. But baptism is the result of salvation, not the means to it.

In spite of the overwhelmingly clear testimony of Scripture, for centuries there have been those who have taught the false doctrine of baptismal regeneration, that salvation is bestowed through baptism. This is a serious heresy. If that sounds overly harsh, re-read Galatians. Paul says that if any good works (even God-ordained rites, like circumcision) are added to the gospel, it pollutes God's pure grace. Paul condemns those who teach such false doctrine in the strongest possible language: "Let him be accursed" ([Gal. 1:8, 9](#))!

I cannot deal with all of the verses which are used to support this heresy, but let's briefly examine a few.

In [Acts 2:38](#), Peter says, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; . . ." If this were the only verse in the Bible that dealt with this subject, and none taught differently, we might conclude that baptism is the condition for forgiveness of sins. But there are many other verses which say nothing of baptism as a requirement for forgiveness. In the very next chapter, Peter exhorts his hearers, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" ([Acts 3:19](#)). He does not mention baptism.

Also, in [Acts 10:43](#), Peter tells the Gentiles at Cornelius' house: "Of Him [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." Again he does not mention baptism as a requirement for forgiveness.

So how do we explain [Acts 2:38](#)? We must understand the close connection in the minds of the apostles between belief and baptism. Peter expected water baptism to be the inevitable result of repentance. To say, "I repent and believe in Jesus" but to refuse to be baptized would call one's repentance and faith into question. So Peter adds baptism as the naturally understood consequence of repentance; but it is not the baptism, but repentance (which is inextricably bound up with saving faith), that brings forgiveness. Baptism is the outward sign of the inward belief.

I can only deal with one other text that is often used to teach that baptism saves a person. In [1 Peter 3:18-21](#), Peter mentions the deliverance of Noah from the flood and then states, "And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (3:21).

There are several interpretive problems in this text, but I am only going to deal with the matter of baptism saving us. Peter takes pains to make it clear that the act of baptism—applying water to the flesh—does *not* save. Rather, it is what the act symbolizes—the appeal to God for a good conscience through the death (3:18) and resurrection (3:21) of Christ—which saves. Peter is saying that the flood was a type of which baptism is the antitype. Just as the flood brought death through judgment to the old, sinful world, but

Noah through faith was borne above the waters to a new life, so with baptism. It symbolizes the fact that we have died through our identification with Christ to our old life and have been raised in newness of life to live for Him. The flood was an illustration of our salvation in Christ; baptism is the same. It is the symbol, not the means, of salvation.

4. Who should be baptized? Should we baptize infants?

The clear teaching of Scripture is that all who believe in Christ as Savior and Lord should be baptized in obedience to Christ. The New Testament order is *always*: The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ; acceptance of the message by faith on the part of the hearers; then, baptism. Never once is there an instance of baptism preceding faith as the norm to be followed. And there are no examples or commands concerning the baptism of the infants or yet unbelieving children of believing parents. Consider the following verses from Acts, noting the order of belief first, then baptism:

2:41: ... those who had received his word were baptized; ...

8:12: But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

8:36-38: And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

While verse 37 [in brackets] lacks strong textual support in the earliest Greek manuscripts, its insertion in later manuscripts shows what the church held to be the necessary qualification for baptism.

10:44, 46b, 47, 48a: While Peter was still speaking these words [the gospel], the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.... Then Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

16:30-34: [The Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas] "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them

into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

If any children were baptized that night, the text is clear that they had believed. There is not a shred of support for infant baptism here.

18:8: And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with his whole household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

Thus the abundant testimony of the New Testament is that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ precedes baptism.

Those who argue for infant baptism say that it is the sign of the New Covenant, just as circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (based on [Col. 2:11-12](#)). However, while there are some parallels between the two signs, there are many differences. The sign of circumcision was administered to the male, physical descendants of Abraham in obedience to the specific command of God. But the New Testament is clear that it is not the physical seed of Abraham which is saved, but the spiritual seed ([Rom. 4:16](#); [9:8](#); [Gal. 3:7](#)). There simply is no command of God to administer baptism to the physical seed of Christians, male or female. If baptism is the fulfillment of circumcision, then just as circumcision was administered to the physical descendants of Abraham in the age of type, so baptism ought to be administered to the spiritual descendants of Abraham in the age of fulfillment, namely, to believers.

Beyond that, we can argue that infant baptism is potentially detrimental. If an adult mistakenly assumes (as it would be most easy to do if brought up under this teaching), that because he was baptized as an infant, he possesses salvation and is a member of Christ's church, then he is sadly deceived. There is no grace imparted in the physical act of baptism, apart from the faith of the one being baptized. To count on one's infant baptism as the basis for standing before God is to trust in a false hope. Only personal faith in the crucified and risen Savior saves a person from sin and hell.

Granted that baptism is only for believers, three more questions arise:

5. How long after one has believed should one wait to be baptized?

Biblical examples indicate that baptism should take place as soon after a person believes as is possible. In the New Testament, the thought of an unbaptized believer was foreign. Baptism followed belief in Christ as one of the first evidences of faith. In many churches today, evangelistic appeals are followed by the statement that believers must not be ashamed to confess Christ publicly. So people are asked to come

stand in front of the church as a confession of their faith in Christ. But in the New Testament, new believers confessed their belief in Christ by being baptized, not by walking the aisle.

It may be advisable to allow for a period of time for instruction in the meaning of baptism and to allow for some evidences of genuine faith to be seen in the believer's life. But this is not required in the Bible. When a person trusts in Christ, he or she should be baptized as soon as it can be arranged.

6. How old should children who believe be before they are baptized?

This depends on the child's maturity. The child should give some evidence, both in understanding and behavior, of being truly born again. While full understanding of the meaning of baptism is not necessary (what adult can say that he *fully* understands it?), some comprehension of the meaning and significance is desirable. Parents should not put pressure on the child, but rather let it be his decision in response to his understanding of the matter from the biblical teaching of his parents and the church. In other words, the child should be old enough to make an informed decision to confess his faith in Christ publicly. He should be old enough so that he can remember it all his life.

7. Should a person who was baptized as an infant or as a non-Christian be re-baptized as a Christian? Should a Christian be re-baptized after falling into sin and repenting?

There is one instance of re-baptism in the New Testament. In [Acts 19:1-5](#), Paul encountered some men who had been baptized by John the Baptist. But apparently they had left Palestine before they heard about Jesus. When Paul told them about Christ, they believed and were baptized a second time, this time in the name of the Lord Jesus. This suggests that a person who was baptized before he came to personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (whether as an infant or older) should be re-baptized as a confession of genuine faith in Christ.

There is no indication in the Bible of any baptized believer in Christ being re-baptized after a lapse of faith or when the person came to a deeper understanding of the real meaning of baptism. The way of restoration for a person who has fallen away from the Lord is confession of sin ([1 John 1:9](#)).

8. What is the proper mode of baptism?

Immersion, sprinkling, and pouring are three common modes. Some who practice immersion do it three times forward (once for each person of the trinity). I don't believe that the mode of baptism should be an

issue worth dividing over. But immersion is the meaning of the Greek word; it best represents the biblical truths symbolized by baptism; and, it was the method used in the early church.

The Greek word for baptize was used of a ship which had sunk or of a man who had drowned (*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Zondervan], 1:144). It means to dip or submerge. But when the translators of the English Bible came to the word, sprinkling was the official mode, so they sidestepped the awkward matter by transliterating the Greek word into English, hence coining the word “baptize.” It should be translated “dipping”!

Immersion best represents the truth of total identification with Christ that baptism symbolizes. When the believer goes into the water, it pictures death (separation) to his old way of life. When he comes out of the water, it speaks of the fact that now he is raised to newness of life in Christ. Immersion also pictures total cleansing from sin. While it ought to be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit ([Matt. 28:19](#)), there is no indication that it requires three separate immersions. Once under better symbolizes the fact that we are placed into Christ once and for all by the Holy Spirit.

Church historian Geoffrey Bromiley states, “Immersion was fairly certainly the original practice and continued in general use up to the Middle Ages. The Reformers agreed that this best brought out the meaning of baptism as a death and resurrection, . . .” (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Baker], p. 113). Even John Calvin (who advocated infant baptism) admits that immersion is the meaning of the term “baptize” and that it was the form used by the primitive church, although he thinks that churches should be free to adopt whatever mode they choose (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [4:15:19]).

Conclusion

If you know Christ as your Savior but you’ve never been baptized as a believer, we encourage you to do so as a confession of your faith in obedience to Christ’s command at the next opportunity.