

Baptism



CALVARY CHURCH



We Believe in Baptism

Because of the confusion over the meaning of baptism among Christians today, many have thrown up their hands in despair or disgust and have said that it must not matter. Others say that, unless a person is baptized in water, he cannot have eternal life with God.

The biblical record on baptism does not show it to be a means for eternal life. We receive eternal life as a gift for trusting in Jesus Christ alone as our Savior from the guilt and penalty of sin (Ephesians 2:8-9). But, neither does Scripture say that baptism is unimportant.

What is Baptism?

Baptism is a public declaration of an inner reality, and it serves as a means to publically declare trust in Jesus Christ as the only way to personal salvation. Baptism is a visual sign of identification, publically symbolizing dying with Christ and being raised with Christ (Romans 6:3-4), which makes us new creatures in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17). This imagery reminds us of what it took to provide salvation and the reality that we are no longer under the death sentence of sin because of the grace of God (Romans 3:21-26; 5:1-11). It also serves as a sign of identification with the universal Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

The word *baptism* is actually a transliteration (instead of a translation) of the Greek word *baptizō*. It always includes the idea of dipping or immersing (sinking a ship, dyeing material, drowning a person), and is different from the Greek words for pouring (*ekcheo*) and sprinkling (*rantizo*).

Before the New Testament was written, Gentiles who wanted to become Jews were circumcised and then immersed in the water. The first biblical record of baptism is the practice of John the Baptist (Matthew 3). John baptized those Jews who confessed their sinfulness and who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His Kingdom. Their act, then, was a symbol of cleansing based upon their confession of need and personal helplessness to save themselves (Matthew 3:6-11). Their circumcision was insufficient to make them subjects of God's Kingdom, as was their baptism. John warned them that water baptism was secondary to another baptism yet to come—Spirit baptism (Matthew 3:11).

After Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, He commanded His disciples to go into all the world, to all peoples, and make disciples by baptizing the converts and teaching them (Matthew 28:19-20).

This is what the disciples did. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 new Jewish converts were baptized (Acts 2:41). When the good news of eternal life was first preached to Gentiles, they too were baptized after it was clear that they also had received the gift of eternal life (Acts 10:47; 11:17-18). When the apostle Paul led men to Christ, he immediately baptized them (Acts 16:33). When Paul found a group of men who had been baptized by John, but had not yet come to know the Lord as their risen Savior, he commanded them to be baptized on the basis of Jesus' authority (Acts 19:5).

Since Jesus commanded baptism, and the apostles practiced it from the beginning of the church at Pentecost and throughout their ministries, we do the same. Since the very concept of "baptizing" means to dip or immerse, that is the mode we use. Since the biblical record shows that only believers were baptized, we also limit baptism to believers.

Some Practical Questions:

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

Based on Acts 2:38 ("*Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins...*") and a few other New Testament passages, a number of churches teach that a person cannot receive eternal life without being baptized in water. This apparently contradicts Ephesians 2:8-9, which says that salvation is a free gift apart from works of any kind. How, then, do we explain Acts 2:38?

The key may be the little word "for" (*eis* in the Greek), which can mean "*with a view toward*" or "*on the basis of.*" For instance, if we say that a man is wanted for murder, we mean *because* he has committed murder, not *so that* he can commit murder. In another baptism passage (Matthew 3:11), that same Greek word is translated as "for," and used in the sense of "on the basis of." John the Baptist said, "*I baptize you in water for repentance,*" and yet, the context makes clear that their personal repentance was a basis for, and prerequisite to, being baptized by John. In the same way, Peter may be saying in Acts 2:38 that those who have trusted Christ as Savior, and have *therefore* received forgiveness of sins, should be baptized.

Another passage (Acts 10:33-48) makes this sequence clear. As Peter preached the gospel for the first time to Gentiles, the hearers believed the message and received the Savior *while they listened*. As evidence that they had received the new birth into eternal life, the Spirit of God entered them, accompanied by external signs so that no one could be mistaken about what had happened. The fact that they had received the Holy Spirit proved they were saved (Romans 8:9). Twice the letters of Paul make clear that the only requirement for receiving the Holy Spirit is to hear with faith (Ephesians 1:13-14; Galatians 3:2). Those to whom Peter was preaching

heard, believed, and received Christ. They were thus placed by the Holy Spirit into Christ's body, the Church ("spirit baptism," 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Because it was evident that they had received the gift of eternal life, Peter then asked, "*Why shouldn't they be baptized too?*" (Acts 10:47). So it is clear that their baptism followed their salvation. Peter defended his action in Acts 11:16-18 by explaining to the other apostles that God had given them the gift of salvation on the basis of faith in Christ alone; therefore there was no reason not to baptize Gentiles.

One final word on this subject: In 1 Corinthians 1:10-12, the Apostle Paul writes to a church apparently divided partly because of the issue of baptism. He says, "*Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel*" (1 Corinthians 1:17). If the requirements of the gospel included water baptism, then Paul was unfaithful to his call and misleading in his message. However, the essential baptism is Spirit baptism (Matthew 3:11; Acts 11:15-16), which means the believer is placed by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). This baptism is a result of faith alone and is a prerequisite to water baptism.

Is Baptism by Immersion Necessary?

The key word in this question is "necessary." Necessary for what? It is certainly not necessary for eternal life. So then, what is baptism for?

The result of baptism is public identification with Christ. First Corinthians 10:2 states that the Israelites were "*baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*" when they came out of Egypt. Obviously, they did not get wet, but they were identified with Moses, their leader, by these elements. With what is the Christian identified in his baptism? Romans 6:3-4 uses the picture of baptism to explain what happens when a person is saved: he is identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Only baptism by immersion pictures that identification. There is no power in water; it is the meaning of the act that counts.

Should I be Re-Baptized?

Those who come from churches that practice infant "baptism" often ask this question, as well as others who have been "baptized" after their conversion by some means other than immersion. The question arises as to whether or not simple contact with water in a religious (even "Christian") setting is actually baptism.

Acts 19:1-7 presents a case study regarding this question. The Apostle Paul met a dozen men who had been baptized under the ministry of John the Baptist, believing his message that the Savior was coming. But they knew nothing of the subsequent events of Calvary, the resurrection, or the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit began to indwell every believer.

Paul asked, *“Have you received the Holy Spirit?”* That, as we saw from Peter’s experience in Acts 10, is the indication that someone has received Jesus as Savior and, with Him, the free gift of eternal life. When the men answered, *“We haven’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,”* Paul knew that they had not yet heard the gospel, so they weren’t yet born again. They had been baptized, but not saved. When they believed in Christ as Savior, then they were baptized.

The conclusion is that baptism before personal salvation is not Christian baptism.

Some ask, *“But isn’t baptism, at least of children, the sign that one is entering under the New Covenant, just as circumcision was a sign of the Old Covenant?”*

Nowhere in the New Testament is baptism called a sign of the New Covenant. In fact, Jesus said at the Last Supper, *“This is my blood of the New Covenant.”* It is through the blood of the Lord Jesus, not water, that one enters the New Covenant.

If there were a parallel between baptism and circumcision, it would be this: a child was circumcised to show he had been born into a Jewish family; a person is baptized to show he is born into God’s family. Just as a Jew could not be circumcised before physical birth, so a Christian cannot be baptized before spiritual birth. Water cannot save—only personal faith in Christ does that. Therefore, the lack of water cannot condemn.

As for believers who have been baptized by sprinkling or pouring after their salvation, they may want to be immersed to show their understanding of the intended picture of water baptism, which is identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. However, there is no biblical text to support this because baptism by modes other than immersion was not practiced in New Testament times.

Is Baptism Necessary for Church Membership?

As we read the New Testament book of Acts, we are impressed with the fact that baptism was the very first step after salvation. For instance, in Acts 16:33 we are told that Paul baptized a group in the middle of the night. Because of the consistency of this practice, it was probably very rare to find an unbaptized Christian, except among those who wanted to keep their faith secret for fear of persecution.

On the other hand, one does not read of “joining a church” in the New Testament. There was not the proliferation of churches and denominations that there is today. True Christians banded together around the teachings of the Apostles to learn, to share, to worship, and to pray (Acts 2:42). All who were saved were welcome at those gatherings, and the only ones who were designated as outsiders were those who did not have the Holy Spirit—that is, those who were unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:23). Water baptism was not, and should not, be the test of fellowship, but rather faith.

As strongly as we believe that baptism should follow salvation at the earliest opportunity in unquestioning submission to the teaching of the New Testament, we also hold that no external rite should govern fellowship among believers or admission to the Lord's table but only *"faith, working through love"* (Galatians 5:6). The only requirements for sharing in the Lord's table, for either a child or an adult, are personal faith in Christ and the confession of known sins (1 Corinthians 11:28).

What About 1 Peter 3:21?

"Baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21) is used by some to support baptismal regeneration. However, two other interpretations of this passage are possible and consistent with the New Testament teaching that eternal life is a gift to those who put their faith in Christ, with no other requirements attached.

Some believe Peter to be talking about Spirit baptism, since it is the work of the Holy Spirit to put us (baptize us) into the body of Christ the moment we trust Christ as our Savior. In the context of 1 Peter 3:20-22, this would be consistent with the fact that it was the ark that saved Noah and his family from destruction, and the ark can be thought of as a symbol of the Lord Jesus, who saves us.

One thing is certain—it was not passing through water that saved Noah and his family because they never got wet. What the water did for them was separate them from the wicked world so that they did not come under the influence of the depravity of the time. Therefore, a second possible way to interpret 1 Peter 3:21 is this: by making a public confession of Christ through baptism, you cut yourself off from your past life and associations, identifying with Christ and His people. In this way, you may be delivered from experiencing the same earthly defeat and despair that comes upon those who do not believe in Christ and upon Christians who do not live godly lives.

Peter was writing to Christians (1:4-5) who faced the danger of suffering for their faith (1:6; 2:21) and were tempted to keep their faith secret. In this context, he clearly states that it is not the external effect of baptism that is beneficial (*"not the putting away of the filth of the flesh"*), but rather the effect which baptism has upon the conscience of a believer (*"an appeal to God for a good conscience"*), knowing that he has identified with his Savior no matter what the cost.

What About Being Born of Water (John 3:5)?

In this context, Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus before His baptism was established and while the baptism of John the Baptist was still the standard. As we have seen from Acts 19:1-7, the baptism of John was not final.

So what does Jesus mean, “*You must be born of water*”? Some have suggested He’s referring to the water of physical birth, but this seems redundant for Jesus to tell someone he must be physically born before being spiritually reborn. Others find the solution in Ephesians 5:25, equating water and the Word, but this anticipates fuller New Testament understanding than was available to Nicodemus.

The best answer is to be found in the Gospel of John itself. In John 7:39, John explains that water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who brings new birth or, to put it another way, that water and the Holy Spirit together represent divine new birth. In John 4:14, Jesus offered the Samaritan woman a well of “*water springing up to eternal life*.” And, in John 3, He tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water (a legitimate translation of the Greek word *kai*)—that is, the Holy Spirit. This would draw upon the Rabbi’s understanding of God’s promise in Ezekiel 36:25-27 to bring new birth to Israel through the work of God’s Holy Spirit which, in that text, is symbolized by a sprinkling of water.

Who Can Administer Baptism?

Since baptism is a public sign of new birth and part of the command given to all believers to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20), we believe that a faithful believer can administer baptism. It should be done in public, not in private.

Since it is a testimony to our church body (as well as to unbelievers who might be attending), our desire is that the person performing the baptism be connected to Calvary Church: one of our pastors or a male family member or spiritual mentor. More information will be provided during our baptism class.

When Should Children be Baptized?

Baptism is an act of obedience and public confession of an individual’s relationship to God through Jesus Christ, and it is only for believers. However, Scripture does not specify the appropriate age or the process that a church should use. At Calvary Church, we see baptism as an opportunity for parents (the primary spiritual influence in their children’s lives) to help their children understand the value and significance of baptism. We provide parents with materials to guide their children through the process, and encourage it for children in upper elementary (grades five and six) or beyond. Knowing the developmental processes of children, we believe that those younger than fifth grade have not had much opportunity to develop their own belief system and to express their faith independently from their parents. We also believe that waiting to be baptized until they have grown in this area can increase the impact of such a significant step. It may also serve as a catalyst for more growth during the teen years, and therefore form a foundation for their walk with Christ as an adult.

We require that all those who desire to be baptized be able to clearly explain the gospel without being prompted.

Parents are encouraged to teach their children the meaning and significance of baptism, but not to rush them into this process. If a child is in Calvary 56 and has expressed a desire to be baptized, parents should contact the Calvary Kids office for more information. If a teen has expressed a desire to be baptized, contact Calvary Student Ministries. It is important to remember that the initiative should come from the child and be supported by parents.

Conclusion

Our purpose has not been to investigate the history of how Christians have interpreted or practiced baptism, but to see what the New Testament has to say about it. What does the evidence show? Baptism is an external rite of dipping or immersing a person into water as a symbol of that person's internal identification with the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His death, burial, and resurrection. Water cannot save; Jesus alone can save. He does not save on the basis of water but on the basis of faith alone. Therefore, baptism follows salvation as a picture of what has happened. It is an important part of Christian practice, serving as an external symbol and reminder of salvation, perhaps in the way a wedding ring symbolizes and reminds us of a marriage. But, one should not confuse the symbol with the reality. When Jesus was asked by Jews in His day, *"What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"*, His answer was clear: *"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent"* (John 6:28-29).

The Apostle Paul made the message just as clear in Romans 4:5 – *"But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."*

Preparing Your Testimony

Before you are baptized, you will be asked to set up a time to record your testimony for a video that will be played for the congregation on the day of your baptism. Our desire is that you will not only be prepared for this experience, but that you will learn how to share your faith story to encourage and bless others and point others to Christ throughout your life.

Your Own Words

While it is important to include some necessary truths in your testimony, it is equally important that you share these truths in your own words.

Necessary Elements

In your testimony, it is important to include both the facts and the heart response to them. The facts are the biblical truths related to salvation and baptism. The heart response is the way in which you have personally embraced these truths and have purposed to apply them to your life. Thinking through the following questions will help you prepare this part of your testimony. If you can include a verse or two along the way, that is great!

Start with the Facts

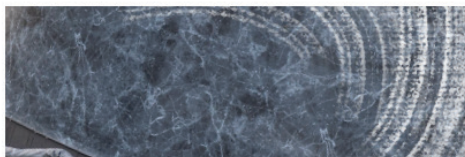
1. Tell us a little about yourself and your family, where you live, and your hobbies.
2. What was your life like before Christ?
3. Why did you need salvation/a Savior?
4. What did Jesus do to solve your sin problem?
5. How did you hear the gospel message?

What Was Your Heart Response?

1. What was your response to the gospel?
2. How has your life been different since your salvation?
3. What is one way God is growing you currently?
4. Is there an aspect of Calvary Church ministry that has played a significant role in your journey? (optional)
5. Do you have a favorite or meaningful verse? If so, be prepared to say/read it and explain why.
6. Finish the sentence: "I am being baptized today because..."

A coach will be provided for you to help you prepare for your video recording. Write down your answers and practice reading them. As you continue to practice, try to put the paper away and express your thoughts in your own words.

You may be nervous about having to video record your testimony. This is a great time for you to learn that, in our weaknesses, God can still be glorified! Even though you may be nervous, God will use your words of testimony to point others to Him and encourage and bless those who are listening.





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