

Baptism

To be considered for baptism or to have someone contact you about questions you may have about baptism, please contact Chris Johnson (chris@lifepointsenatobia.com)

FAQ's

What Is Baptism?

From a physical viewpoint, baptism is a ceremony by which a person is immersed, dunked, or submerged into water. There are two verbs in the New Testament describing this reality: bapt and baptiz. Bapto occurs only four times. It always means to dip, as in dipping a piece of cloth into dye. Baptize is an intensive form of bapt. It is used many times in the New Testament and always means “to dip completely” or even “to drown.”

Another important technical note is that bapt and baptiz are never used in the passive sense. Water is never said to be baptized on someone—i.e., sprinkled or dabbed onto someone’s head. Always someone is baptized into water. That is clear in the New Testament from its very outset.

Matthew 3 begins by describing the ministry of John the Baptist. Verse 6 notes that people were coming out to him and being baptized by him in the Jordan River. Obviously, if they were baptized in the river, they had to be immersed. You do not need a river if you are just going to dab a dot of water on someone’s forehead.

John 3:23 says that “John was also baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there.” Why did he need much water? Because he had multitudes of people who needed to be submerged into water.

The familiar account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is in Acts 8. Philip preached Christ and the eunuch believed. As a result of his faith he said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from begin baptized?” (v. 36). Therefore “they both went down into the water” (v. 38).

Only immersion can accurately portray the reality that baptism is meant to picture: The believer at salvation is united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Going into the water symbolizes death and burial; coming out symbolizes new life. As any student of the Old and New Testaments knows, God likes to teach with symbols, pictures, illustrations, parables, and analogies. Baptism is one of His finest.

What Is the History of Baptism?

Where did it originate? How did we get it? Where did it start? It began back in Old Testament times. The people of Israel had received God’s law, promises, prophets, and covenants. They worshiped the true God. Some of the peoples from other nations, called Gentile nations, recognized that and wanted to identify with Israel so they could worship the true God in the true way. They wanted to become Jews—not racially, for that is impossible—but religiously or spiritually. The system for their doing so was called proselyte induction. It had three parts: circumcision, animal sacrifice, and baptism.

The baptism part involved being immersed in water. It represented the Gentile as dying to the Gentile world and then rising in a new life as a member of a new family in a

new relationship to God. It was in proselyte Gentile immersion that baptism first appeared in redemptive history.

Now skip ahead to the ministry of John the Baptist. His job as Christ's forerunner was to prepare people for the coming of Christ. How did he attempt to do that? He knew Christ would be holy and demand righteousness, so he preached repentance from sin and turning toward God. Then he baptized the people as a visible symbol of that inward turning.

On a special day in the midst of his ministry, a marvelous thing happened: "Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?' But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he permitted Him" (Matt. 3:13–15).

How did Jesus fulfill the righteousness of God? By dying on a cross. Whatever Jesus' baptism means, it is somehow connected to the time when God in His righteous indignation poured out vengeance on the Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect sacrifice. All righteousness was then fulfilled, and a righteous God was satisfied and able to impute righteousness to believing people.

In Luke 12:50 Jesus says, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!" Notice He did not say, "I have a death or crucifixion to undergo." He viewed His death as an immersion, which gave a hint of the resurrection or rising to come. This was all beautifully prefigured in His own baptism.

When James and John asked to sit on Jesus' right and left in the kingdom, Jesus responded, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38). I believe that when Jesus looked at His baptism and said it was to fulfill all righteousness, He was saying, "My death and resurrection will fulfill all righteousness, and I will give a symbolic demonstration of that great baptism yet to come."

What followed after the baptism of Jesus? Jesus Himself began to baptize. According to John 4:1, the Lord was making and baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist. It signified that sinners who believed in Him were affirming their need to die and be buried to the old and to rise in newness of life. After Jesus Himself died and rose again, He gave the command to go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them.

When the church was born, three thousand believed and three thousand were baptized. There's absolute continuity in the historical record of baptism as symbolizing the death of the old and the resurrection of the new. It finds its ultimate fulfillment in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What Is the Theological Significance of Baptism?

What is the spiritual significance of Christian baptism? What is it really depicting? When you as a believer are baptized by immersion into water, you are demonstrating not just the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but also your union with Christ in that death, burial, and resurrection.

For whom did Christ die? You. Whose sins did He bear? Yours. For whom did He rise? You. The Apostle Paul expressed that reality by saying, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). Through a sovereign, spiritual miracle at the moment of salvation, God puts you in Christ. It is as if you died when He died on the cross, and you rose again when He did.

The New Testament sometimes uses the word baptism to speak of that spiritual union only, not of water baptism. Gal. 3:27 says, “All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Col. 2:12 says, “Having been buried with Him in baptism, ... you were also raised up.” And perhaps the most explicit passage of all on our union with Christ reads, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death?” (Rom. 6:3).

Although those passages are not referring to water, it is water baptism that symbolizes our spiritual union with Christ. Notice how the apostle Peter made that distinction: “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” (1 Pet. 3:21). What saves is not water baptism but our spiritual union with Christ, also spoken of as the washing of regeneration in Titus 3:5 and the washing away of sins in Acts 22:16. But water baptism is the symbol of what saves.

Do I have to be Baptized to be Saved?

Some people say you have to be baptized to be a Christian, and if you are not baptized, you are not saved. They are confusing the relationship of water baptism to salvation, which is akin to the relationship of obedience to salvation. Having been saved, we enter into obedience. In the New Testament we see baptism as the immediate and inseparable indicator of salvation. On the day of Pentecost three thousand believed, three thousand were baptized, and three thousand continued in the Apostles’ doctrine, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. No loss. That’s God’s standard. The Apostles insisted on it.

Typically today you may hear someone say, “We had a great evangelistic rally: three thousand were saved, forty-two were baptized, and ten integrated themselves into local churches.” What a difference! The cost of baptism was very high in New Testament times—ostracism from one’s culture, persecution, and sometimes even death. Only those who were serious in their commitment to Christ would pay the price. Baptism was, therefore, the inseparable token of salvation, as it should be today. In Acts 2:38 Peter says, “Repent, and ... be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins.” Does that mean water is needed to wash away sin? No, but the act of baptism is what demonstrates to others that one’s sins have been remitted or forgiven.

People often ask, “Do you have to be baptized to get into heaven?” The thief on the cross did not (Luke 23:39–43). There may be exigencies that preclude baptism, but if someone is reluctant to be baptized, it may be a sign of a heart that is unwilling to obey. And a disobedient heart is a sign of an unregenerate person, for as Jesus said, “If

you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15), and “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46).

Why Is There So Much Confusion Regarding Baptism?

Is the Bible’s discussion of baptism confusing? No, but there are a lot of confused Christians, nonetheless. One of Satan’s main objectives in the life of a believer is to shatter any pattern of obedience—and the sooner the better. If he can make baptism so confusing that one ignores it, then he has started the believer on the path of indifference and disobedience. And Satan has been working overtime to confuse churches throughout the centuries.

The confusion of churches. The Salvation Army, the Quakers (otherwise known as the Friends Church), and the ultradispensationalists (who follow the teachings of E. W. Bullinger) all deny that baptism has a place in the believer’s life today. On the other hand, the Churches of Christ say that baptism saves you. They think that if you believe but do not get baptized, you will go to hell. One extreme errs on the side of grace, and the other on the side of law. One ignores the command to obedience; the other ignores that salvation is by faith.

Outside orthodox Christianity, the Mormon church practices proxy baptism for the dead. It sanctions the heretical concept of being baptized vicariously for another to assure him or her a place in heaven. It is not uncommon in one year alone for the Mormons to have three million proxy baptisms for three million dead people. This is clearly an unbiblical practice.

The error of infant baptism. The Roman Catholic Church instituted infant baptism as a ritual of regeneration. The Catholic Church officially teaches that water cleanses a baby from original sin and results in salvation. Until the Middle Ages they immersed all the babies, and then they started sprinkling them after that.

Roman Catholic theology asserts that a baby who dies without being christened or baptized goes to “the Limbo of the Innocent.” That is supposedly a place where babies live forever enjoying some kind of natural bliss, but without any vision of God. A baptized infant who dies, however, is said to avert that second-class status by going to another place that does have the vision of God.

That notion is patently unbiblical, but it has pervaded many churches beyond just the Roman Church. For example, Martin Luther—initiator of the Protestant Reformation and, therefore, the father of many churches—never disentangled himself from Roman infant baptism. In fact, he wrote the manual that the Lutheran Church uses for infant baptism. He believed that baptism cleansed a baby from sin. When asked, “How can you affirm that if you believe in justification by faith alone?” he replied, “Well, somehow a baby must be able to believe.” There is nothing in the New Testament about babies being baptized or about salvation apart from personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which can come only to one who understands the meaning of the gospel. Why did the practice of infant baptism get started? Early on, the Roman Catholic Church did it to secure everyone into the system. By making everyone from birth a “Christian,” they made sure they belonged to the church and were therefore under its control.

Reformed or Reformation-based churches unfortunately adopted—instead of jettisoning—the long-standing practice of infant baptism, but in time varied it a little.

They teach that when Christian parents have their baby baptized, that baby automatically becomes a little member of God's covenant people. They say that reality is confirmed when the child is old enough to recite the church's catechism properly—a rite known as Confirmation.

A threat to both the Roman and Reformed churches was a group of people who arose and said, "This is all wrong: Baptism is only for people who consciously put their faith in Jesus Christ. Infant baptism means nothing in God's eyes." They faithfully preached the gospel, and many people became converted as a result of their ministry. These infant-baptized converts proved the reality of their conversion by being rebaptized as believers. The bold preachers who led them to do that were known historically as Anabaptists, *ana* being the Greek word for "again." Both Catholic and Protestant churches persecuted them severely, because they viewed them as a threat to their power base. That is one of the greatest tragedies of church history, because the Anabaptists were upholding the teaching of God's Word.

People often ask, "Should I be rebaptized?" If a person was not baptized according to the New Testament—not immersed in water after a conscious commitment of one's life to Jesus Christ—then he or she needs to be baptized. Any other baptism experienced, either wittingly or unwittingly, means nothing. Baptism is only for believers, and it should be done as soon as possible following conversion (Matt. 28:18–19).