

WHAT ABOUT BAPTISM AND COMMUNION?

Attend any Christian church for very long and you will probably see either baptism or communion take place. Naturally, the methods and trappings may vary according to the specific denomination and culture, but in general, Christians around the world regularly practice these two customs. To outsiders, baptism and communion raise several important questions. Why do all Christians participate in these practices? What do they mean? What is so special about being dunked in water or sharing a meal of wine and bread? Does God require these strange acts for salvation?

Let's begin with baptism. Even before Jesus' time, baptism was practiced among early converts to the Jewish faith. Ceremonial washing with water was symbolic in Judaism, therefore baptism indicated a convert's willingness to wash away one's previous ways and identify with new beliefs and a new community. Baptism was also important in the ministry of a Jewish prophet name John, who emerged about the same time as Jesus. The gospels and other ancient literature tell his fascinating story. John preached a compelling message to the Jewish people, drawing large crowds and creating quite a buzz. He claimed that God was about to do something new and thus people should repent of their sins and prepare for God's saving work. In keeping with this message, John urged the crowds who heard him to be baptized, thereby symbolizing their willingness to identify with and embrace his message. As many came forward, John became known as the Baptizer, or John the Baptist. Jesus was even baptized by John. Though he was not repenting of sin, Jesus was aligning himself with John's message and ministry. After all, Jesus himself would be the fulfillment of the message John was preaching.

With this background, it's no wonder that at the end of Jesus' ministry, he told his followers: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, TNIV). In other words, as Jesus' followers took his message of salvation around the world, other people would become disciples, or followers of Christ. When they did, Jesus wanted these new believers to publicly identify with him. So by participating in baptism, a new follower of Jesus symbolically aligns himself or herself with new beliefs and a new community. In fact, the apostle Paul underscored the symbolic picture that being immersed into water communicates. He suggested that baptism represents a person's identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-8). When participants lie back in the water, it signifies the death of their sinful nature. When they come out of the water, it illustrates their new life in Christ. This tradition has continued down through the centuries with all people who become Christians. Simply put, baptism is an external sign of an internal change that has taken place in someone's heart. It is not a means of salvation, but a response to salvation. This is why we *celebrate* baptism – it represents a life changed by God.

The other unique practice among Christians is communion, which is sometimes called the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. While believers are baptized only once to symbolize their new identity as Christians, participating in communion is an ongoing practice. On the night before Jesus' death he ate his final meal with his disciples. It was a special Passover dinner that recalled a significant time in Jewish history when God delivered his people from Egypt. During this meal, Jesus broke some bread and gave it to his disciples. He said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Then he took some of the wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:19-20, TNIV) By using the common elements of bread and wine in the context of an already meaningful tradition, Jesus was marking the occasion deep into the hearts and minds of his followers.

After Jesus rose from the dead, the meaning of his mysterious words became clear. Through Jesus' sacrificial death, God had offered forgiveness of sin to all people. So when early Christians gathered together again, they commemorated Jesus' death on their behalf by sharing bread and wine together in a meal much like that last supper. Thus, communion represents a restored relationship. By believing in Christ's sacrifice, we can have restored relationship with God. And when we share communion together, believers embody a special type of relationship they have with one another as fellow children of God.

When Christians take communion, it is a bittersweet celebration. We reflect on the sins for which Christ died and also consider if there are any specific issues in our lives that we need to confess to God. Yet, communion also celebrates and proclaims God's grace. It is a reminder to us that Christ is the object of our worship and the focus of our hope. Of course, there is nothing magical about the elements of wine or grape juice and bread. But it serves as a powerful act for remembering God's provision for us and renewing ourselves again to his will for our lives. If you are a follower of Christ, it's a privilege to identify with him through baptism and to celebrate his sacrifice with other believers through communion.