

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

What is baptism?

- Baptism is the immersion in water of a follower of Jesus in the name of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Baptism is THE public symbol of your salvation experience – being dead in sin and receiving life in Christ, being cleansed of sin, having a new identity as a child of God. It is an outward symbol of the inward change that occurs at salvation.
- Baptism is the means by which the church identifies who are believers. It is the public witness to your commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Baptism is a declaration of who we worship, who we belong to, who we follow and who we love – Jesus.
- Baptism is a command or an “ordinance” for every Christian. Jesus himself was baptized and commanded his followers to be also.
- Baptism is an act of obedience to Jesus and helps us obey the other commands of Jesus.

What are the important Bible passages on baptism?

- Matthew 28:18-20 – “¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Jesus’ final command was that his followers would share the good news of salvation, make new followers, and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit.
- Mark 1:9-11 – “⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee – and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus himself was baptized as a thirty year old man at the beginning of his public ministry.
- Colossians 2:12 – “¹¹In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” Baptism is an outward sign of the inward change Christ has made.
- Romans 6:1-11 ³Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Notice the parallels between “baptism into his death”, “old self crucified”, “sin done away with”, “dying to sin”.)
- Acts 2:37-38 ³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸Peter replied, “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.” In Acts, baptism was often included as an essential component of responding to the Gospel. It is through baptism that we demonstrate our repentance and faith.
- Acts 16:29-33 – “²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.” Salvation comes from God through faith in Christ. Baptism came after the family had believed and were saved, and then they were immediately baptized. They did not have to wait a period of time.

Does baptism make me a Christian? Must I be baptized to be saved?

No. Baptism is a symbol of a change that has already occurred in your life. It is like a wedding ring; wearing the ring does not make you married; it symbolizes a relationship that you already have. It is a public witness to your relationship with your spouse. Not wanting to wear a ring might indicate a problem with your relationship. Likewise, baptism doesn’t make you a Christian, but tells others that you, in fact, are a Christian. You do not have to be baptized to be saved, but those who are saved will want to be baptized.

Who should be baptized? When? Where? Who can baptize?

Anyone who believes in Jesus as their savior & follows him as their Lord should be baptized as soon as feasibly possible. We want to identify with Jesus! In Scripture, baptism always occurs after conversion and often immediately after conversion. Baptism is the starting line, not the finish line of our faith. All churches teach that baptism is a prerequisite to becoming a member of a local church. Some churches teach that only local churches can perform baptisms while others teach that any believer can baptize others. In Acts 8, Philip baptized the Ethiopian apart from a connection with particular church immediately after he received Christ. BSM recommends you start by talking with your local church to set up your baptism.

- Acts 8:36-38 – “³⁶As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

Why do some churches baptize infants?

The practice of infant baptism became common in the 4th century AD after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Parents wanted their children to be part of the official Roman church, so they began to baptize their infants. Today, those who teach infant baptism say that baptism is to the New Testament what circumcision was to the Old Testament – an outward sign that you are part of the family of God. Since circumcision was done to infants, baptism should be too. However, in the Old Testament, God’s family was a physical family that you joined when you were physically born. In the New Testament, God’s family is a spiritual family that you join when you are spiritually born – born again – when you personally accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In the Bible, every occurrence of baptism is done to those who have already believed and done by immersion into water.

What if I was baptized as an infant or before I became a Christian?

Since baptism is commanded for Believers, if you have not been baptized since trusting Christ as your savior then you should be baptized. Many people worry that it will be disrespectful to their parents if they are re-baptized. However, it is actually a wonderful affirmation to your parents. They baptized you as an infant because they wanted you to someday follow Christ. And now you want to follow Christ. What if you’ve put off being baptized for a long time? Do it now! Baptism isn’t for the Christian who has “arrived” at spiritual maturity but for the believer who is ready to start the process of Christian growth.

Why do some churches baptize with sprinkling or pouring rather than immersion?

Sprinkling likely originated because of convenience, particularly when baptizing infants. Sprinkling is a picture of being cleansed from sin. And while this is a partial picture of salvation, immersion is actually a more powerful picture of salvation – a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and a picture of our death to sin and new life in Christ.

Why do some churches teach you must be baptized to be saved?

Virtually every world religion and Christian cult believes in a system of works-salvation – that we must do good works or rituals in order to be right with God. Part of human nature is to attempt to justify ourselves. However, the Gospel teaches that works, rituals, morality, religion and philosophy are inadequate to save us. Only by trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross can we be saved. However, even Christian churches can be tempted to revert back to looking for outward actions to help justify ourselves. Additionally, some Scriptures may often be taken out of context to argue for “baptismal regeneration”. A very important rule for interpreting the Bible is that “Context is Key”. It is vital that we read verses in their context. And it is vital that we understand the difference between a narrative (a story that tells what happens) and teaching (a passage that presents propositions to be believed).

- Acts 2 - ³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸Peter replied, “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.
- 1 Peter 3:21 – “And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Acts 3:19-20 - ¹⁹Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, ²⁰and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.
- John 3:3-6 ³Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. *(Notice the parallel structure – “born twice”, “born of water, born of spirit”, “born of flesh, born of spirit.” Context clearly points out the “born of water” is our physical birth.)*
- Acts 10:44-48 – ⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” *Notice that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and praising God – all evidence that they were already saved. Then they were baptized. Baptism, then, comes after salvation. It is not required to be saved.*
- Ephesians 2:8-9 - ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. *Salvation comes through faith alone and not outward works like baptism.*
- Romans 10:9-10 – ⁹“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” *In all of Paul’s lengthy teachings on salvation, he never connects salvation with baptism. In fact, he does the opposite.*

Questions to consider:

- Have you been baptized as a believer by immersion? What is stopping you?
- What insights about baptism has this teaching given you? What questions has it raised?
- Why do you think it is important for a believer to be baptized?