

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

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A Resource for Baptismal Preparation or those considering Baptism

Before one is baptized one must understand what baptism is. This resource is meant to give the candidate a brief introduction as to what the Bible says about Baptism.

In the Great Commission Jesus authoritatively gave His Church this commission:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18b–20)

The central word in the Commission is to make disciples, followers of Jesus. This is done by going, baptizing and teaching (before and after conversion). Thus, baptism is central to discipleship and the fulfilling of the Great Commission. It is meant to be the first step in following Jesus, bearing witness to our confession, obedience and identification with the Triune God of the Bible. It declares our allegiance to Him.

I. The Word

Baptism (Greek, βαπτίζω, bap-tid'-zo) literally means the act of plunging, dipping or immersing something into water. Its meaning is directly linked to baptism's mode, meaning and symbolism.

I. Its Biblical Significance

Baptism is something someone visibly does who has responded to the life transforming message of Jesus (the Gospel) to display that they are His disciple. It is more than simply an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality and something that is optional. Baptism is:

- *An ordinance*: a command that Jesus has given that believer's must obey. Since faith is an action, baptism is given as the means by which we demonstrate faith.
- *A sign of the New Covenant, or belief in the Gospel*: it is the visible sign associated with belief in the Gospel that identifies you with Jesus and as a member of His Church (Mt 16:19b; 18:18).¹ It is how we are received into the Church (a rite).
- *A means of grace*: It is a means, that when obeyed in faith, brings with it God's grace (unmerited favour and blessings). At their baptism the candidate will experience great joy and many other spiritual benefits. While it is true a believer is declaring their faith, baptism is an act of God where He makes a declaration over the believer.

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For a baptism to be valid the Bible lays down two simple elements that must be present: subject and mode.

¹ We also identify with Christ by confessing Him with our lips (Ro 10:9–10) and by honouring Him with our lives (Phil 1:27). Even these are only possible through the work of regeneration or baptism by the Spirit (Jn 1:33; Tit 3:5) enabling us to believe and produce the fruit of faith (Mt 6:17) by the indwelling presence of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23).

II. The proper subject: *the believer*

In his Pentecost sermon Peter responded to the crowd's question, "What shall we do?" by saying:

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. (Acts 2:38)

Repentance and baptism ought to be synonymous. Every instance of someone being baptized in the New Testament is accompanied by a personal profession of faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g. Acts 2:41, 8:12, 18:8, etc). Because the Church, or Body, the candidate is baptized into is made up of believers (Acts 2:44), only those who have professed saving faith in Jesus should be considered as rightful candidates for baptism.

III. The proper mode: *full water immersion*

Not only does Scripture prescribe the subject of baptism but also its historic² mode (already obvious in the meaning of the word). It is similar to Jewish purification rituals at the time of Jesus (i.e. the *Mikveh*). When John the Baptist baptized people it says he did so *in* the Jordan *at* Aenon "where water was plentiful" (Jn 3:23). Jesus, who set the example for His followers as He began His ministry, is described as "coming up out of the water" (Mk 1:10). When the Ethiopian Eunuch wanted to be baptized he asked Philip, "See here is water" (and not "pour some water from your waterskin"). Like Jesus's baptism it says, "both went *down into* the water...[Philip] baptized him...and when they *came up out* of the water." (Acts 8:38–9).

From practical examples it is clear that the mode of baptism is by immersion in water. This *believer's baptism by immersion* (also called credo-baptism, *credo* being Latin for belief) is borne out further in its symbolic meanings, which beautifully come together in an actual baptism.

IV. Together fulfilling Biblical symbolism

Paul placed the Christian's belief in and identification with the **death**, burial and resurrection of Jesus this way in Ro 6:3–5:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We 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. For 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.

In baptism the Christian confesses belief that these three great historic acts made salvation possible (1 Cor 15:3–4). They identify that they have personally died to self in order to be raised to new life in Him (Lk 9:23; Ro 6:11; 2 Cor 5:17).

² Immersion was the normative practice until the fourth century. Literary, artistic and archaeological evidence confirm this. For example, the *Didache* speaks of immersion as the norm; Tertullian argued against the introduction of paedo-baptism; the church (c. 256) had a baptistery, as did the church in Ephesus, site of the Council in 431. (c.f. Everett Ferguson, "Baptism in the Early Church" (Eerdmans, 2009).

Though baptism cannot save (1 Per 3:21–22)—this is only through faith in the Gospel—it is nonetheless used as a symbol of the washing away or purification from sin that Christ’s blood accomplished for the believer on the Cross and that the believer receives by faith.

Furthermore it is a sign of allegiance to the Trinity and of union with Christ (Gal 3:26).

V. Joining the Church

As the local church is the expression of the universal church, baptism ordinarily is synonymous with joining or becoming a member of the local church. Discipleship, fellowship and service in this body is something you mature in once you’ve been united to it through baptism.

VI. FAQs

People often have frequently asked questions theological or practical questions about baptism that may not be explicitly addressed above:

➤ Does baptism save?

No, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t extremely important or even closely linked to salvation (as an ordinance, the sign of the Gospel/New Covenant, and as a means of grace). Faith and repentance in Jesus is what saves (as seen in the story of the thief on the cross, Lk 23:42–3). However, we mustn’t allow exceptions to dictate what the Bible has said is to be the norm. Had the thief hypothetically not died on the cross he would have been obligated to be baptized in joyful obedience. His was a deathbed conversion. The norm is that a new believer will be baptized soon after their conversion to give witness to and help establish their faith.

➤ How long after I believe should I be baptized?

Though various groups throughout history, based upon the circumstances, have answered this differently (even up to 18 months!), the New Testament lays down the following pattern: soon after. The baptisms we see in the NT all happened shortly after believing. Any delay is not for the purposes of seeing fruit but ensuring the individual has understood and believed the Gospel; it is to establish a credible profession of faith. (It is also an opportunity for discipleship). Baptism is a huge boost to one’s faith, to delay it may stifle the growth of a new convert. The fruit of faith will progressively follow; baptism should be offered to encourage that not as a result of it. At our church baptism would normally follow within a few weeks of someone coming to Christ and desiring it.

➤ Should children be baptized? Am I too young to be baptized?

The Bible gives no minimum age restriction for baptism (contrary to those who call it adult baptism). I was baptized at the age of 9. If you can make a credible profession of faith then you are old enough to be baptized. Given the vulnerable nature of children special care should be used in discerning a credible profession in their life and the parents’ permission must be sought.

➤ I’m “too old,” do I really need to get baptized? Isn’t baptism just an optional add on to faith in Christ?

The New Testament placed no age limit on baptism and offers no exception. It is a command given to every believer. In fact, in the Bible every believer joyfully and immediately was baptized. To not be baptized is disobedience of a most basic command, which no believer would want to be guilty of. Also, as the sign of the Gospel/New Covenant to not be baptized means you and the Church and the world lacks the assurance that you are a Christian as baptism is a key visible sign of identification with Christ. Lastly, as baptism is a means of grace, the unbaptized individual will miss out on God's blessings in their life. As obedience is the fruit of saving faith in Jesus, why wouldn't someone who professes to be a believer want to be baptized...?

➤ **What about infant baptism/christening? Must those “baptized” as children be “rebaptized”?**

Though personal and family emotions often run high with this question this answer must be grounded in the truth. Infant, or paedo-baptism, is not taught in the New Testament or found in the early centuries of the church. It was a non-biblical practice gradually introduced by the early Catholic Church. Theological rationale is used to explain the gap in the practice. If the proper subject (a believer) and mode (immersion in water) are not present in a baptism, a religious act and called what you like, however meaningful, is not a baptism. If this is your case and you are a believer, with faith filled and joyful obedience, submit to Christ's command to be baptized.

What about circumcision? Circumcision was the sign of the OC, which anticipated Abraham's offspring in Christ. As the New Covenant is new (*kainos*- new as in a new mode of transport, not *neos*-a new car) it has a new sign, baptism. Besides circumcision was only for men.

What about Acts 2:39? This verse, about “the promise” being “for your children” does not speak about baptism (2:38) but the Gospel invitation being extended to all subsequent generations and people.

What about Household baptisms? In the Greco-Roman world young children were not considered part of the household. Any children that may have been baptized were old enough to believe as great care is given in the texts surrounding the word ‘household’ to ensure they thorough understood and believed.

Is it a rejection of my upbringing? No, it is an act of reform. There are no doubt many good and life giving Christian elements from your upbringing. These are to be celebrated. However, one must conform to Scripture. Charles Spurgeon, raised a Congregationalist, still appreciated his parents and grandparents immensely even after he changed his conviction on baptism.

➤ **What about affusion?**

Affusion or sprinkling is also a practice commonly used among Mennonites, and often applied to a believer. Shouldn't someone who was “baptized” as a believer in this way be accepted as baptized? No, because while the subject was correct the mode was unbiblical. Not only does it miss important symbols it is not the mode we expressly see set down in Scripture. Even a group of Mennonites, known as the Waterlanders, who at first embraced affusion later adopted believer's baptism by immersion (the same is true for early Baptist groups). In Acts those who

had received the baptism of John—though similar—were still required to receive the baptism of Jesus (Act 19:3).

➤ **What about self-baptism?**

This is a very rare and unique question. Though a self-baptism would get the subject and mode correct, it misses some other important ingredients, which, however, meaningful, would invalidate the experience. Compare a self-baptism to a self-wedding. Imagine a man and a woman, engaged to be married, decided to marry themselves. Wedding tradition aside it would strike us as odd for two reasons: there was no one officiating over the wedding and no witnesses of the wedding. Those are two vital components of a wedding service. It is the authority of the local Church given by Christ and vested in its officers that in baptism recognizes you as Christ's upon the profession of your faith. The Church officiates over the baptism. Though because of individualism and a reaction against Catholicism perhaps we like to downplay the Church as impotent, yet Scripture says Christ has given her authority, the power to bind and loose (Mt 18:17–20). Secondly, there is the business of witnesses. Witnesses are necessary to validate something as true (Dt 19:15), but also in being baptized before others, whether the gathered church or a small crowd, we bear witness to our faith in the Gospel and allegiance to the Father, Son and Spirit.

➤ **I've been "baptized in the Spirit," do I still need to be baptized by water?**

Firstly, the Bible puts forward baptism in the Spirit as following John's (Old Covenant) baptism for repentance. It is linked with the New Covenant Jesus was ushering in. Specifically it refers to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit that *all* believers receive at conversion. If Jesus gives this Spirit and also commands baptism then they are not meant to be exclusive but complementary.

➤ **What about baptism "in Jesus' name"? (Acts 8:16b)**

Some Pentecostals only baptize "in Jesus' name" only vs. the Trinity. As Jesus is part of the Trinity to identify with him is synonymous with identifying with the Trinity (Luke may even use this phrase as Trinitarian shorthand). If the person baptized had believed in the Gospel then this would ordinarily be accepted (though caution should be exercised if the church was part of Oneness Pentecostalism).

While the norm is to receive a Triune baptism

➤ **I'm afraid**

There are lots of valid reasons to be fearful about being baptized: a phobia of water, being in front of people, or public speaking (sharing your testimony), rejection by family members, danger of life (e.g. converting from Islam). However, faith overcomes fear. The Lord Jesus' love and support for you (and your love for Him) will enable you to overcome. Baptism truly is a test of faith. Ponder the many Biblical promises of encouragement and be reminded of His great faithfulness. If Jesus died for you, you can be baptized for Him.

➤ **How should I prepare for baptism?**

Be watchful, prayerful, expectant, full of praise, meeting with Christians. Even consider fasting on the eve of your baptism. Fix your eyes upon Jesus; Satan does not want you to be baptized and will stop at nothing to stop you. Allow baptismal preparation to be a catalyst to propel you into your journey of following Jesus.

➤ **Should I expect to feel different after my baptism?**

A baptism is a very special time but it is not a miraculous event, per se. Some people will discern or feel a tangible difference but others will not (the same can be true of reading the Bible or praying, let faith and obedience guide you and not feeling alone). Baptism is an ordinary means which testifies to an extraordinary work of grace. As such candidates do experience a profound sense of joy, and joined with faith, assurance, belonging and a desire to move forward in following Jesus as part of the local Church.

➤ **What should I do after baptism**

Membership is sometimes separated from becoming a member of the local church, but should ordinarily be synonymous. You're baptized into the Church, of which the local Church is the visible manifestation. The local Church will disciple you and feed you and encourage you as you begin to follow Jesus. This will involve worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship and service.

VII. What does the baptismal process look like at MBC?

If you've trusted in the Gospel we rejoice with you! Baptismal preparation is a joyous time. First you will need to tell someone about coming to Christ, how Christ saved you (your testimony) and your desire to be baptized. You'll then meet with an elder who will determine the credibility of your profession. This is not meant to be "mean" or "cruel" but to establish the sincerity of your confession of faith; baptism must not be entered into lightly. If there is any concern, delay will be advised. Continue to look to Jesus and be patient with the local church. If the elders deem you are ready to be baptized, you'll meet to ensure you understand what baptism is and even to be discipled in some of the basics of the faith. Usually a dry-run of the baptismal service will be done at this time so you know what to expect. A date will be set, you'll be supported through prayer and you of course are encouraged to invite those you may wish to watch or support you at your baptism. On the day of your baptism you will ordinarily share your testimony publically, answer a few basic questions, be baptized in the name of the Trinity and then be prayed for! Church leaders and members will support you from beginning to end (including giving you a towel to dry off!). Afterwards you begin to live out the Christian life as part of the local church.