

What About Baptism?

To outsiders, baptism raises several important questions. Why do all Christians participate in this practice? What does it mean? What is so special about being dunked in water? Does God require this strange act for salvation?

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 aligns himself or herself with Jesus' beliefs and the community of the church. In fact, the apostle Paul underscored this 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 and burial of their sinful nature in Jesus' death and burial. When they come out of the water, it illustrates their new life in Christ and identifies us with Christ's power over death (Col. 2:12). Simply put, baptism is an outward demonstration of the internal request to God for a clean conscience (1 Peter 3:21). It is external expression of an internal change that has taken place in someone's heart. It is not a means of salvation, but an expression of faith connecting us with Christ's death and resurrection. This is why we *celebrate* baptism – it represents a life being aligned with God and clothed in Jesus, allowing His redemptive power to be at work in us. (Galatians 3:26-27) In the Bible, baptism is the way every new believer responded to Jesus.

Though this is not an exhaustive look at baptism, hopefully you begin to understand the importance of aligning yourself with Jesus' work on the cross in this way. However, this does not answer all of the questions about baptism. Depending on what denomination you attend, there are different ways in which baptism is carried out. Some baptize by sprinkling and some baptize infants. So is there a right or wrong method of baptism? And who can be baptized?

The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. In every case, the word used to refer to baptism is literally baptidzo. Virtually all Greek scholars and Greek Bible dictionaries translate this word to mean, "to dip, plunge, submerge, immerse, or wash." The Bible says that Jesus himself "came up out of the water" (Matt 3:16). This is why we believe that baptism by immersion is what was originally intended to signify the death and burial of Jesus. Sprinkling was introduced into the church around 758 AD, and has no Biblical basis. Sprinkling falls short of expressing the spiritual transformation taking place in a person's life.

Some churches baptize infants. The custom of infant baptism began about 300 years after the Bible was completed. It's a ceremony intended to emphasize a commitment between the parents and God on the behalf of the child. During this ceremony, the parents promised to raise their child in the faith until the child is old enough to make his own personal confession of Christ. However, the bible is very clear that only those who have made a personal decision to believe in Christ's death, resurrection, and payment for their sins be baptized. In the Bible, men and women baptized following their belief in Jesus. If you have been baptized as a baby, we encourage you to be baptized by immersion as a believer.

Which leads to the last question on this subject. When should you be baptized? At the moment you believe (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:35-38). There is no reason to delay. As soon as you have decided to receive Christ into your life, you can and should be baptized. You can be baptized any day of the week and anytime. Some like to have family or their congregation come in as part of the baptism so may wait a few days. But it is clear in the bible that baptism is not something to be put off, but done immediately on the confession of faith and availability of water.