

Baptism

Baptism marks a believer's new birth into the Christian family. It symbolises the commencement of a new life under new management, where Jesus is Lord of all. It declares publicly that we desire to follow God from now on, leaving our old way of doing things behind.

Baptism of believers

All baptisms in the New Testament were of believers. Those baptised in Acts included: the believers on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37-38) and in Samaria (Acts 8:12-13), Saul (Acts 9:18), Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:48), the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:33) and Crispus and his household (Acts 18:8). In these cases baptism was performed only after people had heard the gospel and confessed the Lordship of Christ. Baptism was the seal of their faith.

Infant baptism or christening did not appear until after the 3rd century and was subsequently often seen as a kind of 'insurance' for the child's acceptance by God. However, the act of baptism in itself does not save us (the thief on the cross next to Jesus had no opportunity to be baptised yet Jesus assured him of a place in paradise; Luke 23:40-43). Moreover, babies cannot make a decision to turn away from sin (i.e. living a self-centred life and ignoring or disobeying God) or to believe in and follow Jesus as Lord. Only young people or adults old enough to make up their own minds can do that through the free choice that God has given us. Some Christian churches (like the Methodists or the Salvation Army) do not advocate baptism of believers. However, baptism was the normal practise for believers in the New Testament: *'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.'* (Acts 2:38).

Baptisms were by immersion

The Greek word used in the New Testament for baptism is *baptizo*, which means to plunge, dip, submerge or immerse (in keeping with the symbolism of death and resurrection). It is not the Greek word *rhantizo*, which means to sprinkle (e.g. in Hebrews 9:13).

- Matthew 3:16 'Jesus went *up out* of the water' (Jesus' own baptism)
- John 3:23 'John (the Baptist) baptised there because there was *plenty of water*'
- Acts 8:38-39 'when they came *up out* of the water' (Philip and the Ethiopian)

John the Baptist, the first baptiser, and Jesus' own baptism can be found in Matthew 3. John the Baptist (Jesus' slightly older cousin) was the first to practice baptism as a spiritual act. He baptised thousands of Jews in the River Jordan, to prepare Israel for the Messiah or Christ. John saw baptism as a *moral* act of *repentance* (Matthew 3:2, 3:6, 3:11); people confessed their wrong acts to John and turned their back on their sinful lifestyle.

Jesus insisted that John baptise him to *'to fulfil all righteousness'* (Matthew 3:15) - essentially to do what God his Father asked. This was not just about being obedient but was also setting out how he meant to go on, clean and sinless, fulfilling all of God's law like no one else. Jesus receives confirmation of his Father's approval in Matthew 3:17. Furthermore, the Spirit alights on Jesus as a dove – symbolising peace between Son and Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit alights on the disciples but as tongues of fire as they need purifying and sanctifying. In the New Testament, baptism in water is closely linked to baptism in the Holy Spirit. God does not want us to be only immersed in water, *briefly on a single day of our lives*; he wants us to be fully immersed in his Holy Spirit *every day of our lives*.

Jesus' baptism was at the start of his public ministry

Jesus baptism was a launching pad for his public ministry, works and teaching. He was about 30 years old when he started his public ministry as he obeyed God regarding the right time to do so. Also, it was after he had fulfilled the duties of looking after the family business. Joseph died at some point as Jesus was growing up, so as the oldest boy he would have taken over the building and carpentry business of Joseph until his family responsibilities were completed.

As soon as Jesus was baptised he went into the desert and resisted the temptations of Satan that were designed to make Jesus give up his mission of going to the cross as a sinless man (note that Jesus enters the wilderness after

baptism *full* of the Holy Spirit and returns in the *power* of the Holy Spirit; Luke 4:1-14), becoming the perfect sacrifice, taking our place as a substitute. Jesus then went to the synagogue of his hometown (Nazareth) to declare his fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah (Luke 4:16-21). In the same way, baptism is like a launching pad in our walk with God. It is a kind of '*nailling of our colours to the mast*' for all to see, a public declaration of our faith in Jesus.

Jesus continued to teach baptism throughout his ministry

Jesus delegated the baptising of people to his disciples (John 4:1-2). This was possibly to prevent jealousy e.g. the temptation to say 'I was baptised by Jesus; who were you baptised by?' and to show that the identity of the person baptising is not important, though usually they are a recognized leader in the Church to lend authority to the occasion. The focus of attention should be upon the person being baptised and God, not who else is in the water with them (the apostle Paul comments on this in 1 Corinthians 1:10-16).

Jesus even mentions the importance of baptism when he delivers his final words to his disciples before his ascension into heaven (Matthew 28:18-20). The Great Commission is Jesus' manifesto for his disciples and shows that baptism is meant for *all* believers with *no exceptions*. It is not important exactly when we get baptised (though in the New Testament this was usually promptly after conversion) but it is important that we do. It is a foundational act in us starting to walk with Jesus (Hebrews 6:2).

There are four reasons why all believers need to be baptised

1. Dirty people need a bath (Mark 7:18-23 and 1 Peter 3:21)

There are 2 very different kinds of dirt:

- a) Good 'clean' physical dirt that can be found on us all, especially those with dirty jobs like miners, mechanics, gardeners and any small child. This dirt is on the surface of the skin and can be washed off with soap and water.
- b) Bad 'dirty' dirt that can be found in the thoughts, words and actions of us all, no matter how minor or infrequent we collect it. This is moral dirt (also known as sin) that has everlasting consequences and is impossible to remove ourselves.

Matthew 1:21 tells us that Jesus came to save us from our moral dirt. He paid the penalty demanded for sins and he took them all upon himself through his death on the cross. Only he can remove the moral dirt that separates us from God. His death and resurrection enables our relationship with God to be restored. John the Baptist said baptism was for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5). Jesus' sacrifice means that we are now baptised into Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). God wants to clear away the stuff that is a problem and a barrier between us and Him; whatever that may be, he is able and willing to forgive and cleanse us. We will inevitably sin after we have been baptised but God will continue to forgive - the process of sanctification (making clean) is what the Holy Spirit does in us throughout our Christian life (we should gradually look more like Jesus as we continue to follow Him).

1Pe 3:21 NIV and this water [*Noah's flood*] 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,

Baptism is a symbol of the washing away of sin by Jesus (Acts 22:16; Titus 3:3-7; Hebrews 10:19-22). However, *it also has a real spiritual effect, bringing a fresh start with a clean slate*. 1 Corinthians 10:1-2: suggests baptism is similar to the Israelites passing through the Red Sea – escaping through water from a life of slavery into one of freedom. We are no longer *slaves to sin* but *servants of God*, not through our own efforts but through Jesus' sacrifice (Romans 6).

2. Dead people need a burial (Romans 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:12)

A funeral is a final farewell service that brings a final break with the departed person. It is an ultimate farewell and severs all contact. Being buried and raised is also what is happening in baptism.

It is a final break with the old selfish life spoiled by sin and separated from God – the old life is being buried in the water. So baptism is a bit like a funeral service; that's why we don't baptise ourselves, someone else does it for us. Acts 19:4 shows us that this is a baptism of faith into Jesus, dying to self, as well as a baptism indicating that our sins

have been forgiven. It also shows how important it is to be baptised in the Holy Spirit as well as being baptised in water.

Being immersed in water symbolises death (burial), while rising from the water symbolises resurrection - living life as a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) with a future eternal hope beyond death. Colossians 2:12 '*...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.*'

3. To identify ourselves with Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28)

Jesus identified with us in three ways. Firstly by becoming human like us, born as a baby (into a poor, ordinary family - not into a rich, pampered lifestyle). Secondly he was baptised like us and thirdly he identified Himself with us by going to the cross and dying for us, voluntarily taking all our sin upon him. In Luke 12:50, Jesus compares his future crucifixion to a baptism.

When we get baptised, we identify ourselves with Jesus. 2 Timothy 2:11-12 tell us that if we die with him we will also live with him; if we endure with him, we will also reign with him. We need to consider the cost of following Jesus (Matthew 10:38-39). Jesus is now Number 1 in our lives, not us; he is in the driving seat, he is Lord.

Previously, we were *separated* from Jesus but now we are *reconciled* (Ephesians 2:11-13). Galatians 3:26 says we '*clothe ourselves with Christ*' - we are putting on Jesus as a kind of identity T-Shirt by which we will be known. We are baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16), so that we now belong to him (we are under new ownership).

4. To become part of God's universal church family (Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 4:4-6)

We are no longer separate individuals with class, race or gender separating us; *we are all one in Christ Jesus*.

This unity needs to be kept alive and it is through the local church that this is kept. It does not matter too much what part of God's Church we belong to or where in the world, but we do need to 'belong'. Every Christian needs a spiritual family home where we belong and can be loved and supported. To be loved and cared for in a church family is very important and we are to be part of that example of Christian unity (see John 17:20-23). All we need to qualify to be part of God's global church (see Acts 2:38-39 and Matthew 28:19) is to have repented, believed and been baptised.