

Believer's Baptism

- **What does the word “baptism” mean?**
- **Is baptism necessary?**
- **Who can be baptized?**
- **When is the right time to be baptized?**
- **What are baptism's practical benefits?**
- **What is baptism's spiritual significance?**

The word “to baptize” means: to dip under, to submerge, to immerse. Immersion – lowering the person under water – fits the symbolism of death, burial and resurrection used in Colossians 2:12, “...buried with him [Christ] in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up [ascended] out of the water” (Matthew 3:16). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian VIP, both of them “...went down into the water...” (Acts 8:38). They were on the desert road, going from Jerusalem to Gaza, but they found enough water (perhaps an oasis) even there. Why did both of them descend into the water if not for immersion? Surely, the government official's entourage was traveling with enough water for a poured or a sprinkled baptism.

It is hard for me to imagine a situation where baptism by immersion would not be possible. However, I do know of instances in certain countries when - for lack of appropriate facilities – converted death row prisoners have been baptized by pouring. Unlike the penitent thief on the cross, these modern-day converts often do have a choice to be or not to be baptized.

Some church leaders go so far as to say it's better not to baptize at all, if not by immersion. Personally, I believe that if immersion is not possible, the desire of the convert to be baptized should be honored with an alternative method. But, each local or regional church has to decide how it will perform baptism, especially in unusual circumstances, keeping in mind that it is, after all, a symbolic act.

Is baptism necessary?

Jesus himself commanded that all converts be baptized. “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...” (Gospel of Matthew 28:19). “...Jesus was baptized too” (Luke 3:21). Jesus himself set the example when he was baptized by John the Baptist, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

When 3000 people accepted Christ on the Day of Pentecost, Apostle Peter commanded them to be baptized (See Acts of the Apostles 2:38,41). He did the same when Cornelius (a Gentile) and his household responded to the Good News (See Acts 10:47-48).

Who can be baptized?

In his Great Commission, Jesus clearly stated: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

So, only those who are old enough to understand the Gospel, who believe and receive it,

should be baptized. We call it “believer’s baptism.” But we’re not talking about adults only. Let’s be careful not to limit the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of children. I was four years old when I consciously, rationally and deliberately renounced my agnosticism and became a theist. I was seven years old when I began to ask questions about God’s plan of salvation.

A person must be born again before baptism can be worthwhile. Baptism should not come before a person declares that Jesus is Lord. (See Romans 10:9-10.)

When is the right time to be baptized?

In some countries and cultures, converts to Christ must go through a waiting period before the church agrees to baptize them. The church believes it has good reasons for this practice. In other countries, converts are baptized without having to wait.

In the first century, baptism followed immediately after a person received Christ as Savior. Philip baptized the Ethiopian official minutes after his conversion to Christ (Acts 8:38). In one verse Lydia of Philippi responds to Apostle Paul’s salvation message. In the next verse she is baptized. (See Acts 16:14,15.) Paul and Silas baptized the Philippian jailer and his family the same night they believed (See Acts 16:33).

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward spiritual awakening. Baptism is for those who are taking their very first steps as newborn Christians. It has nothing to do with worthiness, spiritual understanding, growth or maturity. But it is important that the person requesting water baptism has obviously had a genuine born-again experience. Just knowing the correct evangelical language is not enough.

The first-century churches made baptism a condition of church membership, which was a reasonable rule since baptism is God’s own idea of initiation into Christ and into his spiritual body.

What are baptism’s practical benefits?

- A confession of faith has more value if it is public, symbolic and audible.
- A solemn public exhibition makes it more meaningful and memorable.
- It can serve as the first act of open witness.
- It identifies us with a special group of people – the Body of Christ.
- The unsaved observer finds it easier to understand the spiritual significance of what is visibly happening.

What is baptism’s spiritual significance?

Immersion stands for death – Christ’s death for our sins and our death to sin and self.

Coming up out of the water stands for Christ’s resurrection, for victory over the power and penalty of sin and for our coming alive to God alone. It also typifies victory over physical death. Christ arose and we will rise.

Baptism is the figurative grave of our sinful life and the birthplace of a life that is pleasing to God. When a person is buried with Christ in the waters of baptism, s/he agrees with God that her/his sinful nature deserves death (See Romans 6).

Baptism is a symbolic washing, cleansing, purifying of sin, giving us a clear conscience toward God, with no feelings of guilt remaining (1 Peter 3:21). "He [God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit..." (Titus 3:5).

Baptism is not salvation. Only the blood of Christ cleanses sin (See Ephesians 1:7; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5) and only faith saves (See Ephesians 2:8; Galatians 2:16). We are not baptized to *be* saved; we are baptized because we *are* saved. "...what counts is a new creation" (Galatians 6:15).

Baptism focuses on the saved one. The Lord's Supper focuses on the Savior. Baptism concentrates on a pivotal point in my life. It highlights my conversion experience, my decision to follow Christ, my commitment to him. ◇◇◇