

# **What is Biblical Baptism?**

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**CP10 Baptism Course**

## **Lesson one: Why are Christians baptized?**

Perhaps the best place to begin a study about the origins of Christian baptism is with John's baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:13 – 17. Before baptizing Jesus, John the Baptist had been telling his fellow Israelites to be baptized as a way of turning away from their sins and preparing to meet their saviour (Christ).

The gospels make it clear that John's baptism of Jesus didn't indicate that Jesus was a sinner. Instead, Jesus is the one who came to save the world from sin. By being baptized Jesus demonstrated his humble obedience to every command that God had given to his people. God also used this event to introduce his one and only son by sending the Holy Spirit upon Jesus [in the form of a dove] and audibly declaring, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* After Jesus' baptism, John began telling his followers that Jesus was the one who would baptize not only with water but with the Holy Spirit (to cleanse people inwardly from sin). After baptizing Jesus, John's ministry began to fade into the background John testified, *"Now [Jesus] must become greater, and I must become less."* (John 3:29 - 30)

After dying for our sins and rising from the grave, Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18 – 20). It is this instruction of Jesus that is behind the Church's historical and universal practice of baptism to this day.

### **Questions to consider:**

Why do you want to be baptized?

In your own words explain why Jesus is central to Christian baptism?

Why was Jesus baptized by John in Matthew 3:13 – 17.

Read John 1:29 – 34. Explain the difference between John's baptism and the one Jesus spoke about after his death and resurrection (in Matthew 28:18 – 20).

Reflecting on Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16-17, why did Jesus command his followers to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

## **Lesson two: What is the background and meaning of baptism?**

While the Old Testament (written before Jesus) doesn't specifically mention baptism, it does help us understand the background to this Christian practice. The Law of Moses (written about 1500 years before Jesus) describes various religious cleansing rituals. One such ritual involved using a hyssop branch to sprinkle God's people with a mixture of water and the blood of sacrificed animal to purify them of their sins (see Hebrews 9:19 – 22).

Hundreds of years later King David made reference to this Old Testament practice in his Psalm of confession. After sinning with Bathsheba, David prayed, "*Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*" (Psalm 51:2, 7). In these two examples we see the Old Testament connection between cleansing with water, a blood sacrifice, and the forgiveness of sins.

Like the Old Testament cleansing ceremonies before it, Christian baptism also has more than just one meaning, including:

- Repentance, forgiveness, and spiritual renewal (Matthew 3:11 & Titus 3:4-6).
- Baptism demonstrates our unity in Christ as all believers are told to be baptized (1 Corinthians 12:12 -13 & Galatians 3:26 - 28).
- Finally, baptism is a way of symbolically proclaiming Christ's sacrificial death for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection (Romans 6:3 - 4).

### **Is there one correct Biblical method of baptism?**

Because John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan River we can assume that this baptism probably involved Jesus being immersed or going down into the water. But the various Old Testament cleansing rituals (mentioned above) may help us understand the origins of other methods of Christian baptism such as sprinkling and pouring water. It's important to understand that the New Testament doesn't give us instructions on how to baptize. However, the Christian Church gradually began to develop various customs and regulations regarding baptism. For example, a first century early church document known as '*The Didache*' [I.e. 'The Teaching'] states, "*baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living [free flowing] water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit... you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.*" We should note that these traditional instructions are fairly detailed, yet still leave room for various forms of baptism. In other words, it's not the way in which we're baptized that is important, but instead it is our faith in Jesus and our understanding of the meaning behind baptism that truly matters.

### **Questions to consider:**

What are two or three meanings/symbols found in Christian baptism?

What are some different ways in which people in the Bible and in Christian history have been religiously cleansed or baptized?

## **Lesson three: Who should be baptized, and when?**

One thing that is clear is that Jesus instructed all his followers to be baptized as a way of demonstrating their faith in him. In his very first public sermon (40 days after Jesus' death and resurrection) the apostle Peter proclaimed, "*Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.*" *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'* Peter 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.'* 40 *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'* 41 *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."* (Acts 2:36 – 41)

While the Bible doesn't specifically tell us exactly when a believer should be baptized, the New Testament example in the book of Acts indicates that the first believers were baptized immediately after they professed their faith in Jesus Christ. These baptisms happened in church gatherings, in homes, and elsewhere, depending where a believer was when he/she professed their faith in Jesus. (E.g. Acts 2:40 – 41 & 8:36 – 38)

Furthermore, Peter's proclamation about salvation was for both his audience and their children (2:39). In fact we can see a similar principle in the story of the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his household in Acts 16:25 – 34. However, the New Testament doesn't specifically tell us whether all those in these households were old enough to understand and believe the good news about Jesus for themselves or if some of these believing families also had infants who were baptized. But we do know that the question of when to baptize the children of Christians has since become an issue. The New Testament doesn't comment on an age at which a child can or should be baptized. However, the two different church practices regarding baptism are:

1. To only baptize those who are old enough to profess their personal faith in Jesus Christ. In some churches, baptism has become like a confirmation ceremony since a believer is only baptized when he/she demonstrates an adequate understanding of and maturity in the faith.
2. To baptize the infants and children of Christians with the understanding that when they are old enough they must confirm their own faith in Jesus. This second practice sometimes involves baptized infants being 'confirmed' when they are older, before they can share in their first holy communion.

**Baptism and the Holy Spirit:** Although Peter proclaimed to his audience that first they should be baptized and then receive the Holy Spirit, these two things occur in the reverse order in the story of the first Gentile converts (Cornelius and his household) in Acts 10:44 – 48. Therefore, what is important to understand is that water baptism is an outward sign of faith; but receiving the Holy Spirit is a sign that Jesus has come to live within a believe. Peter's words don't mean that believers won't receive the Holy Spirit until they are baptized. In fact, no one is truly 'born again' until he/she has received the Holy Spirit (John 3:1 – 8).

**Questions to consider:**

According to Jesus and his disciples, who should be baptized?

How would you answer someone who asked how soon a person should be baptized after becoming a Christian?

Is there any Biblical evidence that children can be baptized? Explain.

Is there a connection between receiving the Holy Spirit and baptism? Explain.

Read the story of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39 – 43). This story never records that this man was baptized. Therefore, was he saved? Explain.

**Conclusion: What is our church's baptism practice?**

Ephesians 2:8 – 9 states, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast."* Therefore, baptism is not a religious work that saves us, but an outward symbol of God's grace and love for us expressed through Jesus's death for our sins. Our true spiritual cleansing is not done by water but through the internal work of the Holy Spirit. All this explains why Jesus commanded that believers be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In light of its history, and the various traditions surrounding baptism, our church is open to receiving members who have been baptized in various ways in other churches, as long as they are committed to Christ. We are also willing to baptize people by various methods and at various ages. But our most common practice is to baptize professing believers by immersion.

Write down/ask any further questions you have about baptism.

If you are interested in being baptized please contact Rev Chadd Hafer:  
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