

Baptism: An Outward Declaration of an Inward Transformation

Introduction

Baptism is a profound church ordinance commanded by Christ that has been practiced by his followers for millennia. It is a public act of confession, repentance, and faith that acts as the great hinge of a believer's life: The old life of sin and death has gone, and the new life of union with Christ has begun. In baptism, the church commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus while also celebrating the radical commitment of believers who are raised to walk in newness of life with him.

Who do we baptize?

Due to the Bible's abundant testimony to this truth, Grace Christian Fellowship only baptizes those who profess repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. In baptism, the person being baptized affirms with God that he is a sinner (confession), that he is turning from his sin (repentance), and that he accepts the grace of God poured out through his Son (faith). While faith is a gift from God, not a result of works lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9), Scripture presents baptism primarily as a response to this gift of faith and subsequent salvation (Acts 2:38-41; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21).

This is not meant to contradict God's election, in which—from eternity past—God has ordained the baptism of each of his followers. Rather, in this ordination God has chosen baptism to be a conscious, willful, and joyful response on the part of redeemed individuals (cf. Psalm 139:16, Romans 6:17-18). This is why we at GCF do not baptize infants. Not only does the New Testament lack any example of an infant baptism, but all of God's commands to be baptized are predicated on an individual's repentance and faith (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12-13; 10:44-48; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:4-5; 22:16). While infants may certainly be among God's chosen people, they cannot repent of their trespasses and sins; therefore, we do not baptize them. Instead, we as a church commit to partnering with parents to raise a generation for Christ. We commission our parents to raise their children in the hopes that one day those children will stand with us in the baptismal pool and respond to the love which Christ set on them before the foundation of the world.

What does baptism mean?

When someone steps into the baptismal pool they are asked two questions: First, "Do you believe Jesus has done everything necessary to save you?" and second, "Will you serve Jesus where he calls you?" This is our way of displaying to those being baptized, as well as to the congregation, that baptism is the response of sinful men and women to the call of Christ—both for salvation (question 1) for service to his lordship (question 2).

The Apostle Peter tells us that baptism is the way in which we present a clear conscience to God, according to the resurrection of Christ Jesus (1 Peter 3:21). He makes clear that it is not the removal of dirt from the flesh that saves us, but that the commitment of a repentant sinner to Christ in baptism marks the beginning of one's journey as a Christian.

Connecting baptism to the Christian life can also be seen in the preaching of the Apostle Paul in Acts 22, when he tells the crowd to "rise and wash away your sins, calling upon the name of the Lord." Peter, elsewhere in Acts, also tells his hearers to "repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Does baptism save you?

1 Many people argue that baptism is a necessary condition of salvation. While we consider baptism incredibly important, we find this correlation unbiblical. The Apostle Paul wrote, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Confess and believe. Those are the conditions Scripture gives for salvation.

So baptism does not save you. Still, we must not disparage baptism as if it were a peripheral ceremony.

There is nothing magical about the water of baptism itself, but Scripture testifies that something of eternal significance happens when someone submits to Christ in this holy ordinance. In other words, while baptism may act as a symbol, it is not merely a symbol. Something mysteriously profound happens when we go through these waters.

As proof of baptism’s importance, we look to the baptism of Jesus. Even as the perfect Son of God, Jesus submitted to a “baptism of repentance.” He did so, as he noted, to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). In other words, Jesus lived each aspect of the life we were supposed to live so that they could be credited to us. When we are baptized, we are identifying with the life he lived for us. When Jesus was baptized, he heard the affirmation of the Father and was filled by the Holy Spirit. That serves as a picture of what baptism means in our life. It is a “seal” that proclaims God has accepted us in Christ and, upon believing that, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. It is no accident that Jesus was baptized just before entering his temptation with Satan. Only by the power of the Spirit and with the affirmation of the Father could he resist what Satan offered. Just as Jesus did, when we are tempted by Satan we harken back to what was declared over us at baptism.

Our baptism functions in a similar way. Like a flag planted firmly in the ground, our baptism signifies for us and everyone else that we have left the wilderness of sin, where Satan rules, and entered the promised land of obedience to God. Baptism does not have any power in its own rituals, but with baptism come the blessings of Christ, the working of the Spirit, and the confirming word of the Father. Baptism is, at one and the same time, an ordinary expression of obedience as well as a moment when the Spirit of God supernaturally imparts grace into our lives.

Is there a specific mode of baptism?

While baptism has been practiced in many ways throughout the ages, we only baptize by completely submerging a person underwater. We follow this mode for two reasons.

First, baptism by immersion is the only type of baptism found in the New Testament. John the Baptist, for instance, brought people into a river when he needed to baptize them—specifically because he was plunging them into the water. For instance, Jesus, after his baptism, is described as coming up out of the water (Matthew 3:6, 13-17; Mark 1:9-11).

The very word translated “baptize” in Greek—baptizo—literally means “to plunge” or “to immerse.” It wasn’t primarily a religious word, either. The same word was used for ships that went down at sea, or for food that was left to steep in certain broths. Both the etymology of the word and the New Testament usage point toward a common practice of complete immersion.

Second, we baptize by immersion because of what this symbolizes—the symbolism of death and resurrection. Paul, in Romans 6:4-11, points out that when we are baptized, we are being buried with Jesus and raised to new life with him. When people are buried, they do not have a small smattering of dirt sprinkled on them. They are put in the ground. So we, uniting ourselves

with the death of Christ, are plunged into the waters and raised up again, dripping with newness of life.

At Grace Christian Fellowship, who does the baptizing?

Since baptism is an ordinance to be practiced by the community of saints, we at GCF administer baptism through our elders and deacons. These two groups are not the only ones involved in baptism. For instance, when possible, we like to have the father participate in his child's baptism. Similarly, if a husband has come to faith before his wife, we encourage him to be involved in baptizing her. The role of "baptizer" is not limited to the pastors of our church, anyone who the Elders appoint to baptize is authorized to baptize.

Preferably we would have an appointed leader present at the baptism to signify leadership and support in the sacrament of baptism.

What are we baptizing people into?

One of the most important elements of baptism is the Trinitarian formula which signifies whom the believer is committed to, sealed with, and blessed by. Each time someone steps into the baptismal pool and responds positively to the two questions mentioned above, they are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Jesus Christ modeled this Trinitarian component of baptism when he submitted to the practice in the Jordan River: The Father spoke a word of affirmation; the Spirit descended; the Son received them both. In a similar way, our baptism shows the world that we follow the Word of the Father, the example of the Son, and the leading of the Spirit.

In baptism, we are also baptized into a family. Baptism symbolizes our acceptance of God's offer of adoption into his universal family, a family that consists of all of his followers from all generations and locations. More specifically, we are also committing ourselves to a local body of believers. Trusting in Christ and submitting to him in baptism does not automatically make someone a member of Grace Christian Fellowship; but we encourage everyone who has been baptized—as a believer and by immersion—to become a member.

Baptism has rightly been called the "front door" of the church. This means both that it is necessary to be baptized to become a part of the church family, and also that all who are baptized as believers are gladly invited to join us as covenant members of GCF. In addition to membership, baptism also invites people to partake of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 1 Corinthians 11:29, cf. Acts 2:41-42). In baptism we affirm that God has claimed us as his own; in the Lord's Supper we continue in our relationship with him and drawing near to Christ by the power of his Spirit (1 Corinthians 11:23-28). This feeding on Christ is one of the many ways that baptized believers are invited to experience the love of God with the people of God (1 Corinthians 11:17-33).

Do we encourage people to be re-baptized?

Many people at GCF have the experience of coming to faith, only to realize that they had already been baptized. Depending on the context, we may or may not encourage these people to be baptized again.

For believers who were baptized as infants, we will leave the decision to the individual, if they want to be baptized again as an adult— we see this not dishonoring, but ratifying the choice their parents made for them when they were baptized as infants.

If the baptism occurred later, we take the situations on a case-by-case basis. As a general rule, if a person is certain he was not saved when he was first baptized (perhaps he was pressured into it or didn't understand what he was doing) then he should be baptized again.

But if a person's baptism depicted the beginning of a journey of faith—a journey that is often marked by numerous awakenings—then we do not pursue a second baptism. If a person experiences a deeper understanding of Christ and his gospel and feels it invalidates their previous faith, we encourage them not to see it as (re)conversion, but as a progressive deepening of their relationship with Jesus, therefore no encourage a re-baptism.

In practice, we know this distinction can be complicated, and will seek to deal charitably will each case.

What about baptizing children?

As mentioned above, we do not baptize infants. We do, however, believe that anyone who makes a trustworthy profession of faith in Christ and repents of his or her sins should be baptized. Determining the minimum age of a child is on a person-by-person case.

Jesus indicated that true, saving faith could indeed be present in a child's heart. In fact, he indicates that unless faith is similar to that of a child's, it is not real, saving faith (Matthew 18:3)! Children who profess faith in Christ may fall away from their profession when they are older. This is also possible, of course, for adults. If that happens, it indicates that the initial "conversion" was a false one. But Scripture never suggests that fear of false conversions should act as a barrier to baptism. The greater danger is depriving a child of a divinely appointed means of grace that harms the development of their faith.

We never want to deceive anyone into thinking they are saved simply because we allowed them to be baptized, so we make every effort to ensure that anyone requesting baptism has actually given his or her life to Christ. While we do not expect an eight-year-old to articulate what it means to follow Christ in the same way as a college student, we do look for an age-appropriate response that reflects an understanding of the gospel. If an 10-year-old girl truly understands that Jesus has done everything necessary to save her, and is fully prepared to follow Jesus wherever he calls her, we baptize her. We pray that she maintains this confession of faith for the rest of her life. As with all converts, if these children endure to the end, that shows that their conversion is a real one (Hebrews 3:14). If they do not, it shows that their faith was like the seed that fell upon shallow soil—sprung up quickly and showing encouraging signs of life, but withered under the sun of persecution and the weeds of temptation because its roots did not go deep enough.

We do not baptize the children of believers without the recommendation of their parents or guardians. To encourage and pray that parents are involved in the process of their child's baptism and we desire to help equip them in shepherding their children toward Christ.