

BAPTISM

What is it? Why do it? How do we do it?

What Does the Bible Teach about Baptism?

This issue has confused the Church for centuries. Horrible things have been done by church goers to other church goers who disagree on this issue.

My purpose in the explanation that follows is to chart a path for greater Church unity in regards to questions about baptism.

Water Baptism is *not* Salvation

It's necessary before we get far to make one point very clear. Water baptism, regardless of how you practice it, is *not* salvation. Salvation comes by grace through faith (see Ephesians 2:8,9). Water baptism (in and of itself) does not make it more likely that one will receive salvation. Conversely, the absence of water baptism does not (by its mere absence) make it less likely that one will receive salvation.

Two Biblically grounded church practices regarding baptism and a Christian family:

Practice #1

- **An infant of believing parents is baptized.** As an infant is baptized, believing parents symbolically acknowledge that this child needs the saving grace of God. **This practice points to the beautiful, powerful and necessary work of Christ on the cross.** They place their child in the hands of God while committing to raise that child with knowledge of the Lord praying one day that that child would come to saving faith.

- God-willing, that **infant grows to make the faith of their parents their own**, they commit to membership with a local church family which includes a public profession of faith, acknowledging the prayer offered during the symbol of infant baptism now coming to the fruition of a regenerated soul through personal faith.

Practice #2

- **An infant of believing parents is dedicated.** An infant (or young child) of believing parents is formally prayed for in a service among believers while the parents promise before the church family that they'll raise this child with a knowledge of the Lord.
- God-willing, that infant grows to **make the faith of their parents their own**. After that occurs that **individual presents themselves for baptism**. This believer baptism gives public thanks to the Father for the work of regeneration in this person's soul. **This practice points to the beautiful, powerful and necessary work of Christ on the cross.**

What about baptism in a context *outside* Christian upbringing?

Both of these practices exist within the context of a Christian family. **For one who grows up apart from a Christian family and one day steps into a saving relationship with Jesus, believer baptism is appropriate for this person. Those who practice infant baptism and those who practice infant dedication agree on this point.** Yet, they may disagree on whether that believer baptism is more appropriately done through sprinkling of water or immersion.

To be clear, the primary disagreement lies in how baptism is carried out in the context of a Christian upbringing. It is important to note that we have little to nothing written in scripture about baptism in the context of a Christian upbringing (that is second generation Christianity).

When the New Testament was written, Christianity, as we understand it under the new Covenant, was new. This was first generation Christianity. The stories we find in the New Testament involving baptism were all closely connected with recent conversions in the context of first generation Christianity. While these stories offer anecdotal teaching about baptism amidst first generation Christianity, they offer little to no teaching regarding second generation Christianity (or baptism in the context of Christian upbringing). Acts 16:15 & 33 contain the only New Testament glimpses at second generation baptism – and they are only glimpses.

Therefore, finding resolution to the disagreement regarding baptism in the context of Christian upbringing is a tricky task. Given that there is no clear Biblical teaching on this specific point, we must learn what we can about baptism from the whole counsel of scripture and apply that humbly and carefully to the question at hand.

What does the Old Testament say about baptism?

Believe it or not, the Old Testament has a lot to say about baptism. Not that the word *baptism* is used at all, but that the concept at the heart of baptism is used frequently. It's used frequently in terms of the practice of circumcision. That may seem like a huge jump to you in this moment, so let's start at the beginning and move our way there one step at a time.

What is Circumcision?

Circumcision is the practice of cutting off the foreskin of the penis. This was typically done when a male baby was 8 days old.

Through Genesis 17 we learn that this was the practice that God commanded his people to do as part of His Covenant with them.

- God's part of the Covenant: I will be your God.
- People's part of the Covenant: Be circumcised.

On the surface, the people's part of this Covenant, while fairly peculiar, was also fairly easy. Through time we learn that there is more to this practice than the painful act of cutting. God intends this practice to be for His people **a physical symbol that points to a spiritual reality.**

Jeremiah 4:4 identifies this act as a matter of the heart, not the flesh. In doing so he is speaking of a circumcision of the heart. That is the spiritual reality of a cleansed heart.

Jeremiah 4:4: *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
circumcise your hearts,
you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem*

Jeremiah 9:25-27 further distinguishes between the **circumcision of the flesh (the physical symbol)** and the **circumcision of the heart (the spiritual reality of a cleansed heart).**

Jeremiah 9;25-27: ²⁵ *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—* ²⁶ *Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab and all who live in the wilderness in distant places.^[a] For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."*

Once this distinction is made it becomes clear to us that **while the physical symbol is fairly easy for one to accomplish, the spiritual reality is... well... impossible for fallen humanity to accomplish.** The Old Testament carries a consistent theme that while our part in God's Covenant is to have a cleansed heart, we are utterly incapable of holding up our end of the Covenant. We read story after story that reinforces this sad reality. Hope comes in God's promise of salvation, which begins in Genesis 3:15 and is beautifully but slowly developed throughout all of scripture. Our only hope is in the Promised One, the Messiah. Only He can circumcise our heart. **Circumcision throughout the Old Testament points to the beautiful, powerful and necessary work of Christ on the cross.**

Unfortunately this message gets muddled by God’s people. The Jewish nation slips into placing priority on the physical symbol over the spiritual reality (to which it was intended to point). The physical symbol of circumcision becomes an “identifier” of God’s people over and above that which points to the saving act needed for God’s people.

Enter... the New Testament

Circumcision is still being practiced during the time of the New Testament. It continues to take place in the Jewish culture as one of many different symbolic practices that in some way pointed Jewish people to their need to be cleansed. The entire sacrificial system was another significant part of their culture that carried this symbolic message. One of the practices that had grown up within this context was the practice of ceremonial washing.

Mark 7:3 - *The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.*

John 2:6 - *Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.*

This was yet another ritual that the Jews went through to serve as a reminder that they need to be cleansed from their sin.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist enters the scene. John takes this familiar theme (reminder that we need to be cleansed from our sin), adapts the practice of ceremonial washing to what I’ll call *John the Baptist style ceremonial washing* (John was a radical guy. It’s fitting that he would dunk the whole person in a body of water rather than neatly splash some part of them with water from a jar), and then adds a shocking message of urgency. John announces that he is the one prophesied to prepare the way for the Messiah and preaches a message of repentance.

John 1:23 - *John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"*

Luke 3:3 - *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (See also Matthew 3:1 and Mark 1:4.)*

This baptism not only pointed to the need for cleansing but it involved the participant's willful step towards repentance as an appropriate way to prepare for the coming Kingdom.

Note John's clear distinction between the baptism he is doing (physical symbol) and the baptism that Jesus will bring (spiritual reality).

Mathew 3:11- *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (See also Mark 1:8, John 1:26, Luke 3:16.)*

Water baptism is a physical symbol. Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a spiritual reality. Baptism of the Holy Spirit is the cleansing work of the Spirit applied to those who have placed faith in Jesus' work on the cross. *(This should not be confused with the Pentecostal belief in a second baptism of the Spirit. That is an entirely different discussion.)* **While the physical symbol is fairly easy to accomplish, the spiritual reality is impossible for fallen humanity to accomplish.** The spiritual reality is a gift from God. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is applied by the grace of God (see Ephesians 2:8,9) through the faith of a believer.

Baptism of the Holy Spirit is the cleansing work of the Spirit. **Does this sound familiar?** Think back to circumcision. **We defined Circumcision of the Heart as the spiritual reality of a cleansed heart.**

Circumcision of the Heart and Baptism of the Holy Spirit are two ways of talking about the same spiritual reality.

The Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3:16-17 - *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*

This is a shocking collision of **physical symbol** and **spiritual reality** before the very eyes of the on-looking crowd. They don't realize it then but the way that our heart is cleansed is through the Holy Spirit coming into our lives and applying Jesus's work of salvation on the cross to our life. When that happens we too receive God's blessing, *"This is my child whom I love, in whom I am well pleased"*. This is a beautiful and powerful scene in which Jesus is acting out for all to see... baptism in its fullness – **physical symbol** and **spiritual reality**.

Paul Connects Circumcision and Baptism

Colossians 2:11-12 (with **comments added**)

"... in him you were also circumcised (circumcision of the heart – Romans 2:29), in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men (physical symbol) but with the circumcision done by Christ (spiritual reality – circumcision of the Heart), having been buried with him in baptism (dying to self, being spiritually cleansed, receiving Holy Spirit) and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

Notice that Paul speaks of *"the circumcision done by Christ"* and then further articulates it as *"having been buried with him in baptism"*. In

so doing **Paul is using the concepts of circumcision of the heart and Holy Spirit Baptism as interchangeable concepts.**

So what does this all mean?

My purpose in this explanation is to make clear the strong unity between two popular Christian practices. My heart is for the Church to embrace the unity and not trip over the disagreements amidst this issue. I long for the Church in unity to passionately embrace the beauty and significance of the physical symbol of water baptism while gratefully and humbly acknowledging the spiritual reality (the need for and the extravagant gift of Christ's work of salvation on the cross).

Since His covenant with Abraham God has given us, physical symbols pointing to the spiritual reality that is Christ's necessary work of salvation on the cross.

May it be that we would never again get so tripped up by the particulars of the physical symbols such that we risk missing the beauty of the spiritual reality to which they are designed to direct our attention.