

BAPTISM

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Questions & Answers

Robin and I have been married for almost a quarter century, but I remember our wedding ceremony as if it happened yesterday.

I remember the pastor saying to us, right before we recited our vows, that the two of us would be married in God's eyes when we made those promises to one another. He said that nothing that had happened up to that point of the ceremony made us married—and that nothing that happened after we spoke our vows would make us any more married. The actual union, the permanent, miraculous fusion of our lives would occur through the vows.

Then he said, "Greg, repeat after me", and I did.

And he said, "Robin, repeat after me," and she did.

And just like that, we were married. But the ceremony wasn't over.

"May I have a token of these vows?" the pastor said as he reached his hand out toward the best man. Robin expected to see two rings emerge from the best man's pocket, but that's not what happened. Instead, I cleared my throat and said to my new bride, "Honey, I guess now is as good a time as any to tell you this. I decided to forgoe the whole ring thing. It just seemed kind of pointless to me. After all, we're already married. You and I don't need rings to remind us of that, do we? We've got love; who needs rings? So is it OK with you if we have a ringless marriage?"

I know what you're thinking: *You didn't.*

Of course I didn't. If I had, she would have said what any bride would say: "I want my ring! And I want you to put a ring on your finger and never take it off. I want everybody to know that I belong to you and you belong to me till death do us part!"

You see, some symbols really matter. That's true in your relationship with your spouse, if you're married, and it is also true, whatever your marital status, in your relationship with God.

You're not a Christian because of any public rituals you have participated in or any symbolic acts you have performed. It's because you made a decision to put your faith in Jesus Christ—to believe that He died for your sins on a cross and then rose from the dead. From the moment you started following Jesus, you were forever united with Him—and nothing you said or did before or after that moment made you any more or less a Christian.

And yet with salvation comes a ceremony which includes a ritual that symbolizes *visually* what happened *internally* when you put your faith in Jesus. The ritual, the token of your vow to follow Jesus, is called baptism.

If you have not been baptized since becoming a Christian, no doubt you have thought about it. But my guess is that between the Spirit's nudge and the water's edge are some legitimate, unanswered questions that are

rooted in your exposure to different Christian traditions. The denominational differences, in doctrine and practice, are so stark that it's hard to know what God wants you to do. But I think the Bible itself is actually pretty clear about it, so in this article I want to show you the Scripture's answers to some of the most nitty-gritty questions about baptism.

Let's start by dealing with the most basic one of all: *Does it really matter whether or not we get baptized?* That's a good question—especially when you fully grasp the truth that eternal life is a free gift that is given to us on the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ and what he did for us on the cross. It was Jesus who said: “Whoever lives and *believes* in me will never die” (John 11:26). And when the apostles were asked, “What must I do to be saved?” they replied, “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (Acts 16:30-31). There is no good work, and no religious ritual, that we must perform to earn God's favor. We are saved from death and eternal separation from God by his grace through our faith—and faith is an internal thing. It's an invisible thing.

So why, if faith is internal and invisible, why do something as external and visible as getting baptized?

I've often heard it said that we do it because baptism is the way we go public with our faith. Jesus said, “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33). Romans 10:9 echoes the same truth: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Scripture teaches that genuine faith doesn't hide out; it speaks out. And baptism is one way to bring your faith out into the open.

But there are many ways to be open about our faith, I can't find any passage of Scripture that says baptism is the only way. In fact, there are cases in the book of Acts where people were not baptized publicly. The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38) and the Philippian jailor's family

(Acts 16:33) are examples of people who most likely were not baptized in front of crowd.

No, there's a more basic reason for getting baptized than to go public with our faith. Look at the mission Christ gave his followers right before returning to heaven: “...Go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19). We can stop right there, because we've got our answer. The reason baptism is not optional but essential is because the one who has all authority has commanded us to do it. The command is given to the baptizers in this passage, but later in the Book of Acts (2:38) it is given to the baptizees as well. Peter says to those who want to follow Christ: “Be baptized.”

Why didn't Peter tell them to pray the sinner's prayer? Or, with every head bowed and every eye closed, to raise their hand? Or to walk down the aisle? Or to sign a commitment card? There's nothing wrong with anything of those things, but Jesus taught the apostles to give a different kind of invitation. He prescribed baptism as the *physical* expression of a *spiritual* decision to become His disciple.

In John 14:21 Jesus said that the way we prove our love for him is by obeying his commands. That's why baptism matters. It's how we say to Jesus, “I love you.”

But while all Christians agree that Jesus told us to do it, we have denominational differences of opinion about *how* to do it. We all use water, but some churches sprinkle, some pour, and some dip. And even among dipping churches there are variations. Some dip once. Some dip three times. Some dip backward, some dip forward, and some dip straight down. I don't know which way of dipping is best, but I do believe that it's best to dip.

Let me explain why. First, it's what the word means. Baptism is not an English translation of a Greek term; it's a transliteration. All the translators did was move the word *baptizo* from Greek to English. The root word in Greek is *bapto*, which means “to dip”.

That's the word that is used in Luke 16:24, where the rich man who is in hell says to Abraham who is in heaven, "Have pity on me and send Lazarus to *dip* (*bapto*) the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." And in John 13:26, when Jesus is asked which of his disciples will betray him, he says: "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have *dipped* it (*bapto*) in the dish." And Revelation 19:13 says that when Jesus returns He will be dressed in a robe *dipped*—that is, baptized (*bapto*) in blood.

So the very definition of the word *baptize* tells us how to do it.

One denomination that understands that is the Greek Orthodox Church. They speak Greek, so naturally they practice baptism by immersion. In the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Toula's fiancé, Ian, decides to get baptized, but because the church normally baptizes babies, their baptistery is too small for his large body. They solve the problem by blowing up an inflatable pool and dunking him in it. Why don't they just sprinkle or pour water on him? Because that's not what the word *baptize* means. It means to dip.

Another reason dipping is best is because *it symbolizes salvation*. It gives us a visual aid to help us grasp what happens to us when we put our faith in Jesus Christ. Different passages evoke different images.

- Romans 6 and Colossians 2 compare the water to a *grave*. Romans 6:4 says that we were "buried with [Jesus] *through baptism* into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Do you see the picture? When we descend into the water, it is like being lowered into a grave, and we come back up, it is like being raised from the dead. "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come," 2 Corinthians 5:17 says. Baptism graphically illustrates that spiritual reality.
- But there is also a sense in which being baptized is like stepping into a *bathtub*.

Titus 3:5 says that God in his mercy "saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." That's a wonderful passage—especially for those who think they have to clean themselves up before they become a Christian. No, we come to Jesus just as we are and he is the one who cleans us up. Baptism is a dramatization of that cleansing. 1 Peter 3:21 describes baptism, "not [as] the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God." In other words, the cleansing that baptism symbolizes is the internal cleansing that occurs when we say "yes" to following Christ. When we repent and believe in him, we take a moral bath. Our sins are washed away. We get a fresh start. And baptism symbolizes that internal purification.

- One more image that baptism evokes is of a *dressing room*. Galatians 3:27 says: "...All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Isn't that a great picture? We have a brand new spiritual wardrobe. When God looks at us now, he sees Jesus. No longer do we wear the stained clothes of our sinful past; now we are dressed in the pure white holiness of Jesus. The water of baptism represents that new wardrobe.

So you see, baptism is not a meaningless ritual. It is an act of obedience that symbolizes what happens to us when we put our faith in Jesus. At that moment, we die to our old life, we are cleansed from all our sins, and we put on the righteousness of Christ. Dipping a person in water symbolizes all of that!

When do all of those internal changes occur? At the moment that we put our faith in Jesus! So when is the most appropriate time to perform the ritual that symbolizes what happens to us at the moment of salvation? As close to that moment as possible!

I have heard all kinds of logical reasons why a new Christian should not be baptized immediately, but the fact is that *every single time the New Testament records the timing of*

a person's baptism, it was as close to the moment of salvation as possible. In fact, if water was anywhere nearby, baptism was the way that a person expressed faith.

In Acts 2, when Peter preached the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ for the first time, those who heard him "were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37)

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

So that's what they did! "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number *that day*" (Acts 2:41).

How much time elapsed between their decision to believe in Jesus and their baptism? Almost none.

This is the consistent pattern in the book of Acts. In chapter 8, "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there" (8:5). And "*when they believed* Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (8:12). When did they get baptized? When they believed.

Then we come to the story of Philip sharing with an Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus. "As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (8:36-38). How long after the eunuch believed did he get baptized? Not long. He did it as soon as was possible.

In Acts 10, Peter preached the message of Christ to non-Jews for the first time. He said to them, "All the prophets testify about [Jesus] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:43). As he spoke, the Holy Spirit came upon the listeners in an unmistakable way. Peter responded by saying, "'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the

name of Jesus Christ" (10:47-48). How soon after believing in Christ did these people get baptized? Very soon.

Then in chapter 16, there is the story of what happened to the apostles Paul and Silas when they were thrown into a jail in the city of Philippi. There was a violent earthquake, every inmate's chains fell off, the prison doors flew open, and the guard got all shook up. He "called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (16:29-31). That's the only condition of salvation—faith. But keep reading. "*At that hour of the night* the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then *immediately* he and all his family were baptized" (16:33). How long after they believed in Jesus did this family get baptized? Not long.

Are you detecting a pattern? There is not a single passage of Scripture in which there is a significant time gap between a person's decision to believe in Christ and their baptism. That's because Jesus wants it to be our first step of obedience to him. If we cannot take that step at the moment we first believe, he wants us to take it as close to that moment as is possible.

But what if you've already been baptized? Maybe your parents attended a church that baptized babies, and they had you baptized. Or maybe you were baptized as a child, or as a teenager, or even as an adult, but at the time you didn't have genuine faith in Jesus. Should you get re-baptized now that you have made a sincere commitment to Christ?

I think Acts 19 might help you to answer that question. The chapter opens with Paul's encounter with a group of people who had been exposed to the pre-Jesus ministry of John the Baptist, and they had been baptized. But Paul said to them, "'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:4-5). They were re-

baptized. Why? Because their first baptism was not an expression of faith in Christ.

I believe that it's God's will for us to be baptized as believers, even if we were baptized before we were believers.

I was baptized as baby, and when I became a Christian, at the age of 20, no one ever talked to me about being baptized as a believer. I went to a church that that did not perform baptisms in its services, and even though I read the Scriptures regularly, I saw no need for re-baptism. But then I visited a church that did baptize people in its services, and the light went on for me. I realized that if I wanted to obey

everything Jesus commanded, I needed to be baptized. I did it as soon after that as I could. But that was two years after I became a Christian. And ever since that time, I have wished I had done it sooner.

I want your story to be different. I want you to be able to live the rest of your life knowing that you did not delay your obedience to Jesus when it came to baptism. You may not yet have answers to every question you have about baptism, but to the question, *When should you get baptized?* The Bible's answer is clear: Now.