

Understanding Baptism¹

The topic of baptism raises many questions: What does baptism actually mean? Do I need to be baptised before I can call myself a Christian? Do I need to be baptised before I can marry, or before I become a church member? Should I *delay* my baptism until I'm mature or until my parents approve? Should infants be baptised or only believing adults? How should we treat Christians who disagree with us on that issue?

This article is an attempt to address some of these questions, to encourage us with the truth about baptism, and to help us decide if baptism is the right next step for us, or for our children.

1. What does baptism mean?

a. What it is...

They say, *"a picture is worth 1000 words."* Well, the Reformers taught that baptism and the Lord's Supper are "visible words." As we watch a baptism, as we are baptised ourselves, the ritual communicates gospel truth to us. It's a visible word, a gospel message in picture form.

That doesn't mean that we can understand the meaning of baptism simply by observation. We need the written word, the Bible, to help us. But the picture Jesus chose isn't random. Water baptism in the name of the Trinity communicates the gospel in a special way.

Consider the meaning of baptism from the following sets of verses (look them up on your own if you have time):

Set 1: Matt 28:18-20; Acts 10:44-48; 1 Cor 12:12-14; Gal 3:26-29

Set 2: Rom 6:2-5; Col 2:11-12 (Gal 3:26-29)

Set 3: Acts 2:37-39; Acts 22:15-16; 1 Pet 3:20b-22

The first set of verses connect baptism with joining God's family. In more technical terms, baptism is the sign that *initiates* us into God's covenant community. All sorts of clubs and societies have initiation ceremonies. Some are harmless like joining the Boy Scouts, some might be a bit embarrassing like joining a university sports team. But they all have a common goal – get through the initiation and then you're "in", you belong!

So in Matthew 28, what makes a disciple? The first step is to be baptised! Jesus' language confirms that he has initiation in mind: ***"in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit."*** When we are baptised we are identified with God's family. We bear his name.

It's the same idea throughout Acts. Acts 10 is especially striking because of how Peter phrases his question. The Holy Spirit has *already* fallen on Cornelius and his household. God has already made it clear these people belong to his family. And so Peter asks, v47: ***"Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people...?"*** In other words, how can we deny them the outward sign that they belong, when God has so clearly accepted them? That's the first visible word God communicates through our baptism: *you belong to me!*

The second set of verses teach us that baptism is a sign of our union with Christ, specifically our union with his death and resurrection. It marks the beginning of an intimate relationship with him. It's the *end* of our relationship with sin. If the previous set of verses spoke about being joined with the people of God, these verses speak of being joined to Christ himself. It's personal, intimate. His destiny becomes our destiny. Just as he died to sin and rose to new life, we have died to sin and we will rise again. That's the second visible word God communicates through our baptism, ***"You're one with Christ, you're dead to sin, you will rise and live forever!"***

¹ This article is a summarised version of a workshop previously shared by Chris. If you have any questions about it you can reach out to him or another member of staff.

The final set of verses are slightly different and don't fit as well with the 'visible word' idea. In these, baptism is described as the outward act of inner faith. So in Acts 2, Peter's first sermon he doesn't say "repent and believe" but **"repent and be baptised!"** And in his first letter he writes, **"Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you,"**

We might feel uncomfortable with such language. It sounds like baptism is *necessary* for salvation. But the context of those passages makes clear, baptism is the outward act of inner faith. ***Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,***

It's not the physical act of washing that does the trick; it's the appeal to God for a good conscience, in other words *faith*. And in Acts as a whole, Luke clearly wants people to respond to the gospel with belief or faith – he speaks about that far more frequently than the need for baptism.

So *faith* is the key to salvation. *But* in NT terms it is normal – expected even – for that inner faith to be expressed in the outward act of baptism. Baptism is like a wedding ring. If someone puts my wedding ring on your finger it wouldn't mean that you're married to my wife. The ring itself does nothing. But when I agreed to marry my & made my vows the first thing I did was put on the ring. It's a sign of our marriage. I would be married without it, but you'd be concerned if I chose not to wear it.

Well baptism is *the outward act of inner faith*. It's not *an* outward act. It is *the* outward act. Our faith will express itself in many different ways – in godliness, evangelism, financial giving. But they're not the same as baptism. Those acts are fruits of faith but baptism is *the* act of faith - the key outward act that shows the faith that is in our hearts.

Inner faith is primary but it's never divorced from baptism in the way we often do today. And that means baptism is no more optional than faith. Just as we are commanded to believe we are also commanded to be baptised.

b. What it is not...

First, baptism is not a magical ritual. That's clear from 1 Peter 3. Baptism is not magical or inherently powerful. It achieves nothing without faith & the inner work of the Spirit. Second, it's not of ultimate importance. We see that in 1 Corinthians 1:14-17. And finally, baptism is *not* a public declaration of my faith. That might surprise us. It is not a public declaration of my faith, at least not in the way that is commonly expressed. It's common (including at The Crossing) to speak of baptism as the time when we "go public!" We declare before the world that we are Christians.

Obviously that does happen at a baptism service. And it's a *great* thing. It's wonderful to invite non-Christian friends to see you get baptised. It's great to do it in front of the church family. But that doesn't seem to be the *inherent* meaning of baptism. In Acts 8, when the Ethiopian eunuch is baptised, it's just him and Philip. In Acts 9, when Paul is baptised, it seems that very few others are present. When the Philippian jailer is baptised in Acts 16 it seems to be just his family, with Paul & Silas. So *"going public"* is a good thing, a helpful by-product of how we conduct baptisms today. But it doesn't seem to be inherent to the meaning or purpose of baptism.

2. Who should be baptised?

Everyone agrees that adults who convert to Christianity should be baptised. That's a command, not an option. And non-Christians adults should definitely *not* be baptised until they put their faith in Christ.

The main debate, which has raged for hundreds of years, is what happens to the second generation – the children of believers? Should they be baptised as infants or wait until they are older and able to personally trust Christ.

Two preliminary observations. First, this is not a simple question. It can't be settled by looking at one or two verses. The NT does not speak directly about this issue. All the baptisms described in the NT involve new adult converts. To answer the question, we have to consider how different passages and theological issues fit together.

Second, this is a contentious issue. At The Crossing, we do not think infant baptism should divide us. So whatever we conclude personally, we need to exercise humility towards one another. The elders & staff hold different positions and we are happy for people to choose according to their conscience and their best understanding of the Bible.

My own view is that believing parents should baptise their infant children. Not every infant should be baptised; only the children of believing parents. I'll summarise some key reasons why many Christians hold that position. From years of experience giving this workshop the default position of Crossing Church members is *not* to baptise infants. So what follows below is an attempt to give you the strongest biblical reasons in favour of infant baptism, and only some brief consideration of the strongest reasons against it, assuming that's what you already think!

a. In favour of infant baptism

First, children are part of God's family. And if the main purpose of baptism is to initiate people into God's family, then we should not exclude infants, because the NT always treats children as members of God's covenant people.

Consider Mark 10v13-16: ***And they were bringing children to [Jesus] that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. 15 Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." 16 And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.***

The passage isn't about baptism. But the point is that the kingdom belongs to children. They're not just used as an illustration. Jesus says in v15 that adults must receive the kingdom like a child. That's the illustration. But verse 14 says that children *themselves* are included in the kingdom.

That's backed up in NT passages, like Ephesians 6, that address children as God's people, disciples of Christ. It's affirmed in 1 Cor 7:14 where the children of even one believing parent are called "holy". Children are part of God's family. And so the logic goes: if the NT treats children as members of God's people, why hinder them from being baptised?

Secondly, if we accept that baptism is not *primarily* our response to God but a visible word *from* God *to* us, a sign and a seal of God's promise in the language of Romans 4:11, then it makes more sense to baptise infants. What ultimately matters is God's gracious declaration *to the child*, "*you belong to my family!*" Of course faith must *follow* eventually, but an infant baptist would say baptism can come first because in God's economy, grace precedes faith.

The third reason is the biblical pattern of household baptisms. We read about these on several occasions in Acts. The parent or head of the house is baptised and the whole household follows suit. That is not conclusive evidence because we don't know for sure if there were infants in those households. But an infant-baptist would say that it *fits* with the biblical pattern: *God doesn't deal with individuals in isolation but with families*. In the OT the children of believers are always included in God's covenant people. Crucially, the covenant sign of circumcision is given to infants (see Genesis 17.) An infant baptist says the same logic should also apply to baptism.

Various passages like Acts 2:39 strongly suggest that the the pattern of including children in the covenant community should continue: ***And Peter said to them, “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. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”***

b. Against infant baptism

The issue is not clear cut and there are several important counter-points to consider. First, in the NT baptism and faith always go together. And the order is always faith first then baptism. Second, if baptism is also a sign of union with Christ and an outward act of faith, how can those things be true of an infant? Third, some baptists would say there is no *explicit* passage, which tells us that baptism replaces circumcision in the New Covenant. (They disagree that’s the meaning of Colossians 2:11-12). Fourth they would point to some passages in the OT, which might suggest the New Covenant community will consist *only* of believing members (e.g. Jeremiah 31:34).

Both positions have pastoral advantages and disadvantages, neither are clear cut. The key is to consider the Scriptures prayerfully, make a decision with a clear conscience before the Lord, and exercise humility towards those who think differently.

3. Applications & Implications

To those who are *not yet baptised*: get baptised as soon as possible! It’s a wonderful privilege but it’s also a command. For new converts, the pattern in Acts is very clear, baptism happens almost immediately!

It’s the same application for older children who weren’t baptised as infants. There are no guidelines in the Bible about when children of believers should get baptised, so parents need to exercise wisdom in conversation with our professing children. Overall, the NT gives no reason for unnecessary delay.

Of course, it’s easy to say, “get baptised as soon as possible.” But we might face hurdles. We might think, “*I’m not mature enough*” or we might hesitate because our parents object.

Those objections are coming from two different places but the answer is the same. For those who wonder how mature you must be, the NT says *zero* maturity is required. Believers in Acts are baptised as soon as they trust Christ. Delaying until we are more mature actually *contradicts* the meaning of baptism. Remember baptism is *not* me declaring to God *how much I believe*. It is his declaration to me, about what he has done in the gospel. It is, by its very nature, a sign for immature, new believers! It’s different from the Lord’s Supper, which is a recurring sign for obedient believers.

If the reason for delay is parental objection, this is more sensitive and you’ll probably want to talk it through with your CG leader or someone on staff. But in principle, the NT is clear, it is not a valid reason for delay. Instinctively, non-Christian parents often have the right idea about what baptism signifies. Especially in cultures where rituals matter, parents intuitively know that baptism marks the end of one thing and the beginning of another. And that’s why parents from non-Christian backgrounds often object very forcefully to baptism even though they might tolerate many other things. “*Just don’t get baptised,*” is a common instruction.

We might think delaying baptism is a good way to honour them. In fact the opposite is usually true. We need to receive God’s sign that the old *has* ended and the new *has* started. It’s a key way to express our loyalty to Jesus.

A final application to those who are already baptised. In past generations, Christians spoke about, *“improving your baptism”*. That means thinking about your baptism, meditating on it, especially when you see someone else being baptised. You should think about the meaning of the sign and what it communicates about God’s work in your life.

This is how the Westminster Longer Catechism puts it:

The necessary but much neglected duty of “improving our baptism” is to be performed by us for our whole life, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the baptism of others; [we do it] by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of baptism, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed by it, and our solemn vow made in it.

[We improve our baptism] by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism; [we improve our baptism] by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in baptism; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the killing of sin, and increase of grace; and by endeavouring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have in baptism given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.