What is baptism and who should receive it?

Christian Living · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/what-is-baptism-and-who-should-receive-it/

Baptism is a gift from God in which He joins His Word to water and gives the blessings promised in Christ. It is not merely a public symbol of faith or a personal declaration of commitment. In the New Testament, baptism is presented as God's action toward us—a means through which He forgives sins, grants the Holy Spirit, unites us with Christ, and incorporates us into His covenant people (Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3–4; Gal. 3:27).

Because baptism is God's work rather than ours, Christians throughout history have viewed it as far more than a religious ceremony. It is one of the ways God delivers the benefits of Christ's saving work to His people.

The English word *baptism* comes from the Greek word *baptizō*, meaning "to wash," "immerse," or "cleanse." In the New Testament, baptism consistently involves water and God's promise working together. Jesus commanded His disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

The apostle Peter connected baptism with forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit when he preached at Pentecost:

> "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" (Acts 2:38).

Likewise, Paul teaches that through baptism believers are united to Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5). Baptism does not save apart from faith, nor is it a magical ritual. Rather, it is one of the means God uses to create and strengthen faith in those who receive it.

Who should receive baptism?

All Christians agree that believers should be baptized. The primary disagreement among mainstream Christian traditions concerns whether baptism should be administered only to professing believers or also to infants.

Many Baptist, non-denominational, and evangelical churches practice **believer's baptism**, teaching that baptism should follow a personal profession of faith. They point to examples in Acts where people heard the Gospel and were then baptized (Acts 8:36–38; 16:30–34).

Other Christian traditions—including Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, and Orthodox churches—practice **infant baptism**. They believe baptism is primarily God's action rather than a testimony of the individual, and therefore infants may receive it just as infants in Israel received the covenant sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:12; Col. 2:11–12).

Several biblical considerations support this view.

First, Jesus explicitly welcomed little children into His kingdom and declared that the kingdom belongs to such as these (Mark 10:13–16).

Second, Scripture teaches that infants are capable of faith. John the Baptist responded to Christ while still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41–44), and Jesus speaks of children who believe in Him (Matt. 18:6).

Third, the New Testament records several household baptisms (Acts 16:15; Acts 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16). While these passages do not explicitly mention infants, they demonstrate that entire households were commonly received into the covenant community together.

Fourth, Peter's Pentecost sermon declares, "The promise is for you and for your children" (Acts 2:39), echoing the covenant language God frequently used throughout Scripture.

That said, Christians who disagree on the timing of baptism generally agree on its importance and on the necessity of faith in Christ. The disagreement concerns who should receive baptism and how it relates to faith—not whether baptism itself is commanded by Christ.

What about the mode of baptism?

Christians also differ on whether baptism must be performed by immersion.

Some traditions strongly prefer immersion because it vividly portrays burial and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:3–4). Others practice pouring or sprinkling in addition to immersion.

The New Testament does not explicitly require a specific amount of water. The focus is consistently on the presence of water and God's promise rather than the precise mode. Throughout church history, immersion, pouring, and sprinkling have all been practiced.

Key Scriptures to Study

- Matthew 28:18–20 — Jesus commands baptism for all nations.
- Mark 16:16 — Jesus connects faith and baptism.
- Acts 2:38–39 — Baptism is linked to forgiveness and God's promise.
- Acts 16:15 — Lydia and her household are baptized.
- Acts 16:33 — The Philippian jailer's household is baptized.
- Romans 6:3–5 — Baptism unites believers to Christ's death and resurrection.
- Galatians 3:26–29 — Baptized believers are clothed with Christ.
- Colossians 2:11–12 — Baptism is connected to covenant inclusion.
- 1 Peter 3:21 — Peter explicitly discusses baptism's saving significance.

Objections & Misconceptions

Common Objection: "Is baptism just an outward symbol?"

Response: Baptism certainly symbolizes important spiritual realities, but the New Testament says more than that. Scripture connects baptism with forgiveness, union with Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into God's people (Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3–5; Gal. 3:27).

Common Objection: "Does baptism save a person automatically?"

Response: No. The New Testament never treats baptism as a magical ritual. Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8–9). Baptism is one of the means through which God delivers His promises, but unbelief can reject those promises.

Common Objection: "Should someone be rebaptized?"

Response: Most historic Christian traditions teach that baptism is God's act and therefore only needs to occur once. The validity of baptism depends on God's promise, not the strength of the recipient's faith at the time.

Common Objection: "Can infants have faith?"

Response: Christians disagree on this question. Those who practice infant baptism point to passages such as Luke 1:41–44, Matthew 18:6, and the broader biblical teaching that faith itself is God's gift (Eph. 2:8–9). Those who practice believer's baptism generally argue that personal profession should precede baptism.

Why This Matters

Baptism matters because Jesus commanded it and attached His promises to it. It is not an optional add-on to the Christian life but part of Christian discipleship from the very beginning.

Baptism also provides tremendous assurance. When believers struggle with doubt, they can look not merely to their own feelings or decisions but to God's objective promise. Baptism reminds us that salvation rests not on what we have done for God, but on what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, baptism points away from itself and toward the Gospel. The water is important because God's promise is attached to it. And that promise always leads us back to Christ, whose death and resurrection are the source of our forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Recommended Resources

- *Baptism: Three Views* — David F. Wright (editor)
- *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* — Joachim Jeremias
- *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* — Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (editors)
- *Baptism and the Lord's Supper* — J. V. Fesko
- *Luther's Small Catechism* — Martin Luther (especially the section on Baptism)