

BAPTISM

A VISIBLE PICTURE
OF AN
INVISIBLE REALITY

BAPTISM

THEREFORE GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM
IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT,
AND TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU.
AND SURELY I WILL BE WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE VERY END OF THE AGE.

MATTHEW 28:19-20

For nearly two thousand years, almost all who professed to be followers of Christ have sought to obey Christ's command. Through the centuries various groups have worked out differing traditions as to what, why, who, when and how people are to be baptized. There is no disputing the fact that historically, and today, evangelical Christians hold strongly differing viewpoints on this subject. Blackhawk Church believes that baptism is not a "major" doctrine that should be the cause of division among Christians, but is nonetheless a matter of importance and represents one of the most frequently asked questions that I receive as a pastor. People regularly ask me, "What does Blackhawk Church believe about baptism?" This booklet is intended to answer that question.¹

No one can read the New Testament without being aware that baptism held an important place in the life of the early church. In the book of Acts, when an individual became a Christian, he or she was immediately baptized. In fact, one scholar observed that in the New Testament there is no such person as an unbaptized Christian.² However, what was once a source of celebration for New Testament Christians has become, through the centuries, a cause of division and disunity, with a bewildering variety of practices and beliefs. Some baptize infants; others baptize only older children and adults. Some baptize by sprinkling a few drops of water on a person, while others pour water, and still others immerse the person under the water. Some groups teach that baptism is essential for salvation, while others insist that baptism must not be understood as a means of salvation.

These are important issues, some more so than others. Obviously, a little booklet like this cannot deal with the issues in depth. It should also be noted that a particular form or understanding of baptism is not a requirement for membership, service or leadership at Blackhawk Church. When Christians differ, it is tempting to set aside the question as unimportant and dispensable. But since the Bible takes baptism seriously and many who come to Blackhawk have serious questions about baptism, we will treat the subject seriously.

¹I am indebted to Gary Inrig of Trinity Church in Redlands, California for the idea of a simple booklet on baptism.

Some of the material that follows is borrowed from a similar booklet that he wrote for his church.

²F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 77.

There are six questions that people frequently have about baptism at Blackhawk Church:

1. *What does baptism do? (the meaning of baptism)*
2. *Why should someone be baptized? (the reasons for baptism)*
3. *Who is baptism for? (the recipients of baptism)*
4. *At what age can a child be baptized at Blackhawk?
(the appropriate age for children)*
5. *How should baptism be done? (the method or mode of baptism)*
6. *Where and how often are baptisms performed at Blackhawk?*

1. WHAT DOES BAPTISM DO? THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism is the most important question when it comes to the subject of baptism. Some have taught that baptism is essential for salvation. At Blackhawk Church, we believe that baptism is important, but it is not essential for salvation. Salvation comes through faith alone in Christ alone (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9).

In Romans 1:16, Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Paul clearly states that the power of God for salvation is the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul defines the core of the gospel as being the message that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. Some people would insist that baptism is also a part of the gospel that saves people. However, in 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul clearly distinguishes the difference between the gospel and baptism when he says, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel." In Paul's mind there was a difference. That passage also states that Paul did not baptize many in the Corinthian church, a fact that is hard to understand if baptism were essential for salvation and part of the core message of the gospel.

On the very first occasion the gospel was preached to Gentiles, an amazing thing took place. The Lord had supernaturally arranged the encounter between Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10). As Peter declared the gospel to a group of Cornelius' family and friends in Caesarea, he declared the good news, "Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through His name." Apparently, their hearts opened to receive the message because "the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message" (Acts 10:44). They had become believers in Christ and had received the gift of eternal life. "So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48). The order of these events is of great importance. These people were baptized not in order to receive the Spirit or the gift of salvation, but because they already had been saved. Baptism did not accomplish their salvation; it came after their salvation.

Baptism is the outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible transformation of life. When someone trusts in Jesus Christ for their salvation, they are "baptized" into the death,

burial and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-4). What exactly this means is a subject of some discussion. I believe that the apostle Paul is referring to something spiritual that happens to every person who transfers their faith to Jesus Christ, and Him alone, for their salvation. In effect, the Holy Spirit unites us to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. We are "baptized into Christ" (Galatians 3:27). This is an inward, invisible transformation of our life. It is real, but we cannot see it. *Water baptism* symbolizes that invisible baptism. When we are baptized (immersed in water) we are completely covered with water. We are "clothed" with water. This illustrates what happens to us when the Holy Spirit baptizes us into Christ; we are "clothed in Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Water baptism is a visible picture of what has already happened in an invisible way.

People who believe that baptism is essential for salvation confuse the important outward act (water baptism) with the essential life changing and invisible work of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, baptism consistently followed a profession of faith. In practice, the two things were tightly linked, but they were not one and the same thing. In most weddings, couples exchange rings. In practice, the vows and the rings are inseparable. But according to the law they are separable. It is the vow that establishes the marriage bond. The wedding ring is the outward sign of the invisible bond. The ring is important but it is not essential. If someone loses their wedding ring, they still remained married even though they may not have a ring on their finger.

Baptism is similar. We are saved entirely on the basis of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We are saved through faith, a total reliance upon the Lord. Baptism is an outward expression of that inward reality. Without faith, baptism is meaningless. With faith, baptism becomes the dramatic expression of the inward reality.

Baptism then is a symbol of salvation, not a cause of it or an anticipation of it. It is the visible sign to God, to believers, and to the world of our faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

2. WHY SHOULD WE BE BAPTIZED? THE REASONS FOR BAPTISM

If baptism is only an outward symbol of the inward reality of salvation, why should anyone be baptized?

First, the Lord Jesus Christ commands that His disciples baptize those who decide to follow Him. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is therefore an act of obedience for anyone who claims to follow Christ. However, it is not simply an act of duty. Baptism is an expression of our love for our Lord, because Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching” (John 14:23).

Second, baptism becomes a testimony to our friends and family that we have indeed transferred our trust to Jesus Christ for our salvation. Since we share the gospel at every baptism, baptism becomes a visible picture of what happens to someone who has believed the gospel. People will remember that you are a Christian because they saw you being baptized.

Third, baptism is a testimony to ourselves that we have, indeed, entered into God’s kingdom by placing our faith in Christ. It is a physical reminder that something invisible has happened to us.

3. WHO IS BAPTISM FOR? THE RECIPIENTS OF BAPTISM

Probably the most obvious difference between various church traditions revolves around the question of whether baptism is for believers only or whether infants should be baptized.

The pattern revealed at several places in the New Testament is that only those who give a believable profession of faith should be baptized. This view is often called “believers’ baptism,” since it holds that only those who actually believe in Christ should be baptized. A quick survey of some passages makes this observation clear. After Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, we read, “Those who received His word were baptized” (Acts 2:41). Similarly, when Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, we read, “When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12). Likewise, when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ home, he allowed baptism for those who had “heard” the word and “received the Holy Spirit.” Therefore, for those who had similar experiences to Peter and the early church at the beginning of the church (Pentecost), Peter said, “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Then Peter “commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:44-47). The point of these three passages is that baptism was given to those who had received the gospel and trusted Jesus Christ for their salvation.

These passages reveal a consistent New Testament pattern. As soon as someone professed faith in Christ they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes they were baptized immediately (cf. Acts 8:36-38; 9:17-18; 16:32-34; 18:8; 19:4-5).

If the witness of the New Testament is so clear, where does the practice of infant baptism come from? One scholar, Kurt Aland, has determined after an extensive study of early Christian literature, that no one can provide conclusive evidence of an infant baptism before A.D. 200.³ However, after that time, it became increasingly prevalent in the church.

Both Roman Catholics and Protestants practice infant baptism. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism should be administered to infants, an act often referred to

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as “christening.” The reason for this is that the Roman Catholic Church believes that baptism is necessary for salvation and that the act of baptism itself causes regeneration. Ludwig Ott, in his *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, explains that through the sacrament of baptism a person is “spiritually reborn.”⁴ He further notes that baptism is necessary for salvation and is ordinarily performed by priests.⁵ Essential to the Roman Catholic view of baptism is the belief that the sacraments work apart from the faith of the people participating in the sacrament. And if this is so, then it follows that baptism would confer grace even on infants who do not have the ability to exercise faith.

Many Protestants have also practiced infant baptism, sometimes referred to as *paedobaptism* (the prefix *paedo-* means “child” and is derived from the Greek word *pais*, “child”). In this view, all infant children of believing parents are baptized. This practice is sometimes known as a “covenant argument,” because it depends on seeing infants born to believers as part of the “covenant community” of God’s people. Those who argue in favor of infant baptism stress two arguments. First is the belief that infant baptism is the Christian counterpart to circumcision, an initiatory rite that made a child a member of the covenant community. Circumcision was administered to all Israelite males when they were eight days old. It is often said that Colossians 2:11-12 makes this connection. However, there are strong reasons for doubting that the New Testament church saw baptism as the replacement for circumcision. In the first century, some Jewish Christians demanded that the Gentile Christians should be circumcised (Acts 15:1). No one argued against that view by saying that Gentile Christians need not be circumcised because baptism had replaced circumcision. Jewish Christians did not stop circumcising their children, and Timothy was circumcised as an adult even though he had been baptized as a Christian (Acts 16:3), which is difficult to explain if baptism had taken the place of circumcision.

A second argument for infant baptism is the use of the term “household” in passages such as Acts 16:14-15; 16:30-34 and 1 Corinthians 1:16. The implication is that the households would have had infants, but that is not an obvious implication. As today, only a fraction of households have infants. More importantly, in Acts 16:34, the whole family is said to believe,

and the same is true of Acts 18:8, where “Crispus and his entire household believed.” These words suggest quite strongly that the entire household had individually come to faith in Christ. The texts for “households” simply do not contain any information about whether there were infants in the households or not. It is ambiguous evidence for infant baptism.

In a casual reading of the New Testament, there is a clear and unbreakable connection between belief and baptism. Someone places their faith in Christ and then is baptized. Infant baptism, however, changes that connection. Obviously, an infant cannot believe, and a parent’s or a grandparent’s faith is not the same thing as a personal faith. The change to infant baptism, which became prevalent after the third century, was probably well-intentioned. Most parents mean only good things when they have their infants baptized. But because the child won’t remember the event at all, it will be totally disconnected from their faith, which seems to be the opposite of the New Testament pattern.

Sometimes the question arises from those, who like me, were baptized before their salvation experience: should they be baptized as believers? Clearly this is a personal matter about which someone needs to seek the Lord. In many cases at Blackhawk, individuals have become convinced that their baptism as a believer would be a witness to their friends, children, or other family members of their personal faith in Christ and their commitment to be a devoted follower of Him.

³Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*, 1963.

⁴Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Herder, 1955), p. 350.

⁵Ibid. p. 356.

4. AT WHAT AGE CAN A CHILD BE BAPTIZED AT BLACKHAWK?

We believe ministry to children is important. Many children are capable of understanding the salvation message. However, they are also very concrete thinkers. Many are not capable of understanding the nuances of the meaning of baptism. The concept of baptism being a visible representation of something that happens to us spiritually is very abstract. It is important for someone getting baptized to fully understand that baptism connects us with Christ in a unique way, while at the same time it is not tied to our salvation. For children, that can be confusing.

Moreover, though children are capable of having an authentic faith, their faith is also very tied to their parents' faith and influence. Many children who grow up in Christian homes struggle with their Christian identity when they reach adulthood. It can be difficult to remember when or if their faith became their own choice and not just their parents' choice.

Baptism is an opportunity for Christians to have a faith marker. It confirms a time they declared their faith as their own. When adults who were baptized as children reflect on the experience, it can be difficult for them to remember the experience well. It is easy to feel foggy about whether the baptism was a choice that they truly understood and whether it was a choice that was truly their own. Even if it seemed clear when they were a child, upon later reflection, their baptism does not feel like it was a significant step that they chose to take.

Though Jesus asks believers to be baptized, He does not say that it has to be done by a certain age, or a certain amount of time after believing in Him. We want to ensure that people getting baptized fully understand the choice they are making. We also want to ensure that it occurs in such a way that provides a significant and memorable marker for their spiritual journey. Therefore, we strongly recommend that children wait until they are in 5th grade before being baptized at Blackhawk.

In addition, parents are invited to participate in a Child Dedication at Blackhawk. Throughout the year, parents publicly present their children to God and express their desire and commitment to raising their child to know and love God. This is a parent's act of dedication, making a spiritual commitment to God on behalf of their child.

If you feel that your child has a good reason for being baptized earlier than 5th grade, please contact Blackhawk Kids to talk about why he or she wants to be baptized at this time. (828-4200, kids@blackhawkchurch.org)

5. HOW SHOULD BAPTISM BE PERFORMED? THE METHOD OF BAPTISM

We believe that the practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out by immersion, wherein one is placed completely under water, and then brought back up again. Sometimes this is referred to as the *mode* of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament. This seems evident to me for the following reasons:

First, the Greek word *baptizo* means, “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water.⁶ This is the commonly recognized and standard meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside the Bible.

Second, the sense of “immersion” is appropriate and probably required for the word in several New Testament passages. In Mark 1:5, people were baptized by John “in the river Jordan.” Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized “He came up out of the water” (Mark 1:10). The fact that John and Jesus went into the river and came up out of it strongly suggests immersion, since sprinkling or pouring of water could much more readily have been done standing beside the river, particularly because multitudes of people were coming for baptism. In another place, we see that John the Baptist “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water there” (John 3:23). Again, it would not take “plenty of water” to baptize people by sprinkling, but it would take plenty of water to baptize people by immersion. (See also Acts 8:36).

Third, the symbolism of union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection seems to require baptism by immersion. Paul tells the Colossians, “having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). This truth is symbolized best in baptism that is by immersion. When someone goes down into the water, it is a picture of going down into the grave and being buried with Christ. Coming up out of the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life (cf. Romans 6:3-4). Baptism by sprinkling or pouring simply misses this symbolism.

At Blackhawk Church, we want to respect the genuine and sincere differences that exist between Christians on the subject of baptism. We welcome all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to join us in membership. A specific experience of baptism is not required as a condition of membership, but we also want people to think seriously and biblically about baptism.

Sometimes we are asked, “what if a person cannot be immersed for medical reasons?” In those cases, we ask the candidate for the baptism to instruct us as to what would be physically safe for them. In each case, the person instructs us to get them as wet as possible by pouring water all over them. These are wonderful exceptions and have become some of my most treasured pictures of a person’s total commitment to the spirit of the New Testament practice.

⁶A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by Walter Bauer. Revised and Translated by Wm. Arndt, F. Gingrich, F. Danker. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979. p.131.

6. WHERE & HOW OFTEN ARE BAPTISMS PERFORMED AT BLACKHAWK?

We have a baptistery at Blackhawk Brader Way and Blackhawk Fitchburg. We usually only have three to four baptism services per year. We generally try to schedule them every three to four months.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN GETTING BAPTIZED?

Should you desire to be baptized please complete the *Baptism Commitment Form* that can be found online. Once we receive your form, you will be contacted with more details. If you still have questions about baptism, please contact us and we can connect you with a pastor.

On the day of the baptism, several pastors may participate in the baptism service. Since the question of who does the baptizing is not discussed in the New Testament, we have allowed lay people who have significant roles in the life of the individual to perform some baptisms. Typically, a member of the pastoral staff performs the baptisms at Blackhawk Church.

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet. We hope that it helps you understand why we do what we do at Blackhawk Church when it comes to the important and sometimes controversial subject of baptism.

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