

Statement of Belief: Baptism

We believe baptism is a sacrament from God, commanded by Jesus (Matt. 28:19-20), representing new birth in Christ (Titus 3:5-6, John 3:3) and cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16), and signifying the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit as God's sign and seal (Rom. 4:11, Eph. 1:13) incorporating believers into God's grace and covenant with the church (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism carries these meanings because it symbolizes our union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-7; Col. 2:11-14), and this union with Christ is the only source of our salvation (1 John 5:11-12; 1 Peter 3:18-22).

Baptism does not guarantee ultimate salvation for anyone. To be saved, everyone must receive the gift of faith through the grace of God (Eph. 2:8-9), confess with their mouths Jesus is Lord, and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). In addition, baptism is not necessary for salvation (Luke 23:43). But it is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, for he commanded baptism for all who believe in him.

Discussion

The proper subjects of baptism and the proper mode of baptism have been debated for centuries. These debates have divided the church and caused severe discord among true believers. Crossroads' position is that the specific practice of baptism is not an essential doctrine¹. It should not be the basis of division among genuine Christians, but baptism is a matter of importance for ordinary church life, so must still be given full consideration.

Who should be baptized?

The primary controversy surrounding baptism is the question of whether infants should be baptized. The believer's baptism or credobaptist position states that baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Others hold to the infant baptism or paedobaptist position saying infants of believing parents should be baptized. The New Testament nowhere commands us to baptize infants, but neither does it anywhere forbid it. Recognizing the absence of explicit teaching on the baptism of infants, both sides are forced to rely upon inferences in Scripture, thus much grace and patience should be extended to all who are trying their best to understand what God instructs regarding baptism. The following sections summarize the arguments used by paedobaptists and credobaptists to defend their positions.

¹ Essential theological issues would include those doctrines most central to the Christian faith which have significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines, or have a significant impact on how we live the Christian life. Included among these most crucial doctrines would be truths such as but not limited to the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith, and the authority, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture. These first-order doctrines represent the fundamental core of the Christian faith, and a denial of these doctrines represents nothing less than an eventual denial of Christianity itself.

Infant Baptism

First, in the Old Testament, there is no standard chronology for faith and circumcision. Abraham was circumcised after professing faith (Gen. 17:22-27), but Isaac was circumcised before his confession (Gen. 21:4). Faith in the Lord was necessary in both cases to appropriate all the benefits that circumcision promises, but the administration of the sign and seal was not tied to the timing of their faith. Circumcision and baptism are linked (Col. 2:8-15), and so baptism, like circumcision, need not be tied to the moment of profession. The cleansing and forgiveness symbolized in baptism are the result of Jesus' saving work through his death and resurrection prior to anything done by those who benefit from that work. The baptism of an infant witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith (Rom. 5:8).

Second, the old covenant promises were given to adults and their children, and this was depicted in circumcision. Thus, it is hard to imagine that the greater new covenant promises and signs should not also be given to the infant children of believing adults. Peter actually tells us the new covenant promises are gifts for the children of believers (Acts 2:38-39). Twenty-five percent of the baptisms found in the New Testament are of entire households (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16), and these homes likely included children.

Finally, Paul says the children of a Christian parent are set apart to God (1 Cor. 7:12-14). Circumcision visibly set a child of believers apart under the Old Covenant, and so it would be hard for Jewish converts to believe the Lord would not include New Covenant children in the command to baptize.

Believer's Baptism

In every New Testament command and instance of baptism, repentance and faith precede baptism. In other words, the pattern established in the Bible is belief first and then baptism. Since baptism is the symbol of the beginning the Christian life, it should only be administered to those who have in fact begun the Christian life. For example, Acts 2:41 records "those who received his word were baptized." Similarly, in Acts 8:12 we read, "But 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." According to most scholars, the practice of infant baptism did not start until the second or third centuries. By all indications, the early church only administered the sacrament to those exhibiting faith.

What about the household baptisms in Acts 16:15, Acts 16:33 and 1 Corinthians 1:16? These examples are not decisive for one position or another since the inclusion or exclusion of infants is simply not explicit. If we look closely, though, we'll see again indications of saving faith on the part of all of those baptized. For example, the entire family of the Philippian jailer was baptized in Acts 16:33, but Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him and all that were in his house" (Acts 16:32). If the word of the Lord was spoken to all in the house, then it seems reasonable to conclude all were old enough to understand the word and believe it.

But what about the sign of the covenant made with the children of Israelites in the Old Covenant? Why is baptism not administered to the children of Christian parents in the New Covenant as circumcision was administered to the children of Jewish parents in the former covenant? The New Covenant members are not defined by physical descent, as the Old Covenant members were, but by God's writing his law on their heart and calling them to himself and bringing them to repentance and faith. In accord with this narrowing of the covenant people to those who are truly born of God, the new sign of the covenant is meant to signify that a person is indeed part of that new born covenant community, which is evident by faith. In the same way that a change in the sign came in to allow both men and women to participate in the sign (baptism instead of circumcision), thus making it clearer than before that women and men are equal heirs of salvation (1 Peter 3:7), so also a change in the recipients of the sign came in to make it clearer that under the New Covenant the people of God are not determined at all by physical descent, but by spiritual transformation, evidenced in faith.

Finally, the New Testament authors wrote as though they clearly assumed that everyone who was baptized had also personally trusted in Christ and experienced salvation. Paul says, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27) indicating baptism is the outward sign of inward regeneration. This simply could not be true of infants who have not yet come to a saving faith and "put on Christ". Paul speaks the same way in Romans 6:3-4: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death." Again, Paul could not have written those things regarding infants because he is speaking only of the regenerate believer². A similar argument can be made from Col. 2:11-12.

What is the correct way to baptize - immersion or sprinkling?

Christians disagree over the proper mode of baptism. Some believe the sacrament is only valid if the recipient is immersed completely under water. Others are convinced that pouring, sprinkling, or dipping are appropriate modes of baptism. While some may have strong convictions regarding the matter, there is not enough evidence in Scripture to lead anyone to break fellowship with other believers who differ over the mode of baptism.

The English word baptism comes from the Greek *bapto* or *baptizo*. To clarify the meaning of these terms we will consider their use in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament often employed by the apostles when composing the New Testament.

In the Septuagint, these terms primarily refer to cleansing and not to the mode used to effect it. The verb *baptizo* is rendered dipped in 2 Kings 5:14. Daniel 4:33, on the other hand, uses the terms in question for wetting in general and not for immersion. In the New Testament, *baptizo* sometimes referred to Jewish ritual washings in general (Mark 7:4), which reveals a main emphasis on making something clean.

² This is not to argue that no infants can be regenerated considering those that die before they are old enough to understand and believe the gospel.

Many say the references to John the Baptist doing his work in the Jordan River prove immersion was favored in the first century. But given the evidence from the Septuagint, it is just as likely that the person stood in the river and had water poured on his head without being fully immersed. In fact, early Christian art depicts John doing this, possibly revealing that pouring was his actual practice.

The practice of baptism at Crossroads

In practice, Crossroads will support parents who, after careful consideration of Scripture, believe they are obeying God through baptizing their infant children. Similarly, Crossroads will support parents who understand believer's baptism to be the pattern established in Scripture and delay baptism until their children show signs of a true saving faith. Adults who can understand the Gospel message should exhibit evidence of a genuine faith prior to baptism. For them, baptism is an act of obedience and a public proclamation of their faith.

Crossroads will perform both immersion and sprinkling baptisms. God can use any amount of water to bless those being baptized and those witnessing the baptism. Both modes satisfy the meaning of the Greek verb *baptizo* and the symbolic requirement of passing under, and emerging from, cleansing water.

References

These references contain more detailed arguments for the infant baptism and believer's baptism positions.

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<https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/packer/baptism.html>

<https://www.gty.org/library/Articles/A360>

<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/infant-baptism-and-the-new-covenant-community>

Other references

Systematic Theology by Louis Berkhof (paedobaptist position)

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem (credobaptist position)