

Baptism

What Is It? & How Does It Work?

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After he was raised back to life, Jesus said to his followers:

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.**' (Matthew 28:18-19).

Baptism is the entry point to the Christian faith. For an adult it is a response to coming to faith. For a child, it means a commitment by parents (or at least one parent) and sponsors to bring their child up in faith.



Origins

Baptism was originally a Jewish ceremony. Before Jesus began his ministry, John 'the Baptist' was baptizing people in the Jordan river. At that time people who wanted to make a break with their previous way of life were turning to God for forgiveness and a fresh start. John's baptism was a way to express this change of heart. Jesus himself was baptized by John in the Jordan river.

The traditional term for spiritual 'turning' to God is **repentance**.

Symbolism of Christian Baptism

The original Greek word *baptizo* meant going under water and getting all drenched and soaked in the process. This word was often used for dyeing cloth, or to describe a sunken ship. These images capture two key meanings of **washing**, and of **being changed**.

Washing

Our sins are 'washed' away or cleansed from us through baptism. This is an image of God's gift of full, complete forgiveness.

But you were washed, you were sanctified (declared holy) you were justified (declared innocent) in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:11)

Being changed (spiritual rebirth)

Just as a baby is born from the water of her mother's womb, so baptism in water stands for rebirth into a new life, a life which only God can give by his Holy Spirit, 'poured out' on us. God's Spirit unites with our spirit to make a new person.

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, who he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

(Titus 3:4-7.)

Christians believe that through baptism the power of Jesus' own resurrection is invoked and experienced in the spiritual realm. The two meanings of baptism — washing and change — are sometimes described using the language of death and coming back to life. Going under the water suggests a burial. This is a death of the old way of life. Many people find it very encouraging to understand that in baptism their old life is finished with, together with its failures, frustrations and sins. This is the ultimate cleansing. Coming up out of the water then stands for resurrection: returning to life, but in a completely new way.

... you have 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)

Baptism and denominations

Most Christian denominations recognize the baptism of other denominations. For example, an Anglican baptism is recognized by the Roman Catholic church and vice versa. However some traditions teach that baptism is only for adults who can make a commitment on their own behalf. The Anglican tradition allows infant baptism, on the grounds that we are a people in community, including children from the moment of birth.



Sponsors

It is traditional for **adult** candidates for baptism to have one or more sponsors: these are Christian friends who agree to be present as witnesses to their friend's new faith.

For **infant** baptism the older tradition was to have at least two godparents. These days, both the parents and godparents are together referred to as **sponsors**, and they take the same vows together on behalf of the child. Each sponsor — parent or godparent — should be sure of their faith in making these promises. If one parent is not a believer, they would probably not wish to be a sponsor. All that is required is that one believing parent be willing to act as a sponsor.

It is anticipated that in bringing an infant for baptism, sponsors will support and encourage the growing child in developing their own individual Christian faith. This would include helping them to develop a living connection to a church community as they grow up.

Where it can be done?

Baptism can be done anywhere that water is found. It is usual, indeed preferred, to do it with a congregation present, because it marks entrance into membership of God's people, the church. This symbolism is most clearly understood when it takes place in the context of the regular Sunday worship service. This way the congregation, God's people in that place, can extend a happy welcome to the new Christian.

Conditions for Baptism

The four conditions for baptism are:

1. Repentance. Belief that you have done wrong, that this is not pleasing to God, and you want to turn away from living this way.
2. Renouncing and rejecting Satan. A commitment to reject Satan, all darkness and all evil. This also implies the breaking of any evil curse or claim over one's life, of any kind.

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
(Colossians 1:13)

3. Faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. This is a belief that Jesus came to earth as God's Son, that he died, enduring the consequences of our sins on our behalf, and after this God raised him again to life. Because of Jesus, we can participate in God's life: we can experience full and complete forgiveness, and a profound spiritual rebirth, which leads to eternal life after death. These gifts of God are received by believing in Jesus Christ. (See the *Why Jesus?* booklet for more explanation of the Christian Faith.)

4. Commitment to Christian community. Baptism is the way into membership of God's people, the church. For infants and small children, these conditions are met through the faith of the parent(s) and sponsors, and their commitment to bring the child up in the Christian faith. In time children can make this decision for themselves.

The effects of baptism

Baptism is the sign of someone becoming a child of God, a member of Christ's people, the Church. This brings all the benefits of being in relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

As the 'sacrament of faith', baptism is a sure sign of being saved by God from the powers of evil, and from the effects of sin. It is a visible assurance of eternal life with God. It 'marks' us as belonging to God, and 'seals' us as having been rebirthed by God's Holy Spirit.

Because all Christians share the same baptism, it is also a sign of the unity of God's people, that we are all children of God without distinction:

... for all of you who were baptized in Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

The Results of Baptism:

Baptism should result in a changed life:

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him 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. (Romans 6:2-4)

How is it done?

Baptism is done in the most graphic way by full immersion. The new Christian goes down under the water, and then comes up again.

For infants there is often a baptism by pouring some water over the head. Although the actions are different, this is regarded as a full, real baptism.

While the immersion or pouring happens, the minister says the words 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

A baptism service also includes other aspects:

The Presentation. At first the sponsors are asked to present the candidates and they make their own promises of support for them.

The Decision. Then the persons being baptised announce their decision to 'turn to Christ'. This decision includes renouncing evil, and Satan, which is followed by a prayer delivering the person being baptized from 'all the powers of darkness'.

Affirming the Christian Faith. Just before the baptism itself the candidates and sponsors affirm the Christian faith together. The ancient tradition is to do this using the words of the Creed.