

Baptism

What should we believe?



There is no doubt that being baptized with water is a clear command of Jesus, and therefore a key aspect of our discipleship (e.g. Mt 28:19, Mk 16:16). Where there is doubt, within the Body of Christ is on the following four aspects of baptism:

1. The appropriate subjects of baptism
2. The appropriate manner of baptism
3. What baptism achieves
4. Whether baptism is necessary for salvation or not

To take them in turn, we find the following spectrum of views associated with each heading. On #1, some believe that babies should be baptized, while others insist that this should be reserved for believers only. Even within the “believers only” camp, some would argue for baptism to occur immediately after a personal expression of faith, while others would believe that waiting a while is more prudent. On #2, some believe that a sprinkling of water is sufficient, while others insist that only full immersion under water does justice to what the Bible expects – with many sitting on the fence between the two understandings. On #3, some would say that baptism is actually the means of receiving grace to make a person righteous and save them, while others would be very careful to insist that this is absolutely not the case and that baptism is merely a sign pointing to a greater reality. Finally, on #4, some would insist that babies who are not baptized go somewhere different (and less pleasant!) than babies who die who have been baptized.

This booklet will outline three separate views on water baptism, showing how they understand these four aspects above and discuss how biblically sound they are. It will conclude with the position of Hills Bible Church.

View 1 – the Roman Catholic View

Roman Catholics baptize those entering into the Catholic Church by sprinkling, which includes babies. It is their belief that once the person (child) is baptized they are immediately placed into a position of grace whereby they are fit for heaven. This status is maintained until they commit either venial or mortal sins, after which they need to follow the process of confession and penance. All going well this process will take them back to their post-baptism status. Baptism for the Catholic Church is the first, and most important sacrament, for salvation. This view is shared by some Anglicans and Methodists. This view is described in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which says:

Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. (CCC 1213)

The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation... Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed... The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude. (CCC 1257)

By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin (CCC 1263).

Strengths of this Position

There is little to commend this position except the understanding that baptism is very important.

Weaknesses with this Position

This view has some major flaws. Firstly, the Bible is clear, salvation comes by grace through faith alone (e.g. Eph 2:4-9; Rom 3:28; 2 Tim 1:9). Baptism cannot aid in this. Secondly, if baptism is necessary for salvation, then what do we make of the criminal on the cross next to Jesus, who was assured of his salvation despite never being baptized

(Luke 23:43)? Finally, given that the Bible insists that conscious faith in Jesus is necessary to be regenerated and saved (Rom 3:22; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9), how is a baby who is baptized, and does not have the mental faculty of consciousness, experience this reality?

Hills Bible Church's Response

HBC would not be comfortable accepting into membership someone who holds to this understanding of baptism. We believe that it is seriously flawed, and confuses one of the most critical doctrines we believe – how a person gets made right with God. We would attempt to persuade anyone holding to this view of baptism of its serious error, and guide them to a biblical understand of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

View 2 – the Reformed View (Covenant Baptism)

The historical Reformed view of baptism is known as Covenant Baptism. This view is held by the Presbyterian Church and some Anglicans and is also conducted by sprinkling or pouring water. While this view, like the Catholic Church, encourages the baptism of infants they reject the idea of baptismal regeneration. Instead, they believe strongly in God's covenant of grace that extends across both Old and New Testaments. In the OT circumcision was the inaugurating act of a person's entrance into the covenant family and blessings of God. To them, baptism is the NT equivalent. Scriptures such as Acts 2:39 ("this promise is for you and for your children...") and 1 Cor 10:1-3 suggest that baptism should not be withheld from infants.

Their position is represented in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which includes the following paragraphs:

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ... to be unto [the person being baptised] a sign and seal of the

covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life.

Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.

Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptised.

Although it is a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated.

Strengths of this Position

Contrary to the Roman Catholic position, we respect that the Reformed view is more carefully built from an understanding of the infallibility of Scripture, and represents an attempt to synthesise the over-arching story of the Bible. Within this view there is a strong desire to trace the consistency of God's dealings with people across the OT and NT. This view rightly rejects baptismal regeneration. It is acknowledged that the NT never speaks against infant baptism and that there may be instances where children were baptized, though this is not certain (e.g. Acts 16:15).

Weaknesses with this Position

While this second view of baptism has far more to commend it than the first one, it still has some critical flaws with it. Firstly, the NT formula seems, at every turn, to be "repent and be baptised" (e.g. Acts 2:38; Matt 3:11), and not "baptize and then repent." Secondly, while there is continuity between the Old and New Testaments (e.g. the way of

salvation is and has always been, through OT and NT, grace through faith), there is nevertheless real discontinuity at the same time. To become a member of the OT covenant community, one simply needed to be born a Jew, while to become a member of the NT covenant community, one needed to be born again by the Holy Spirit. In other words, if circumcision was given to those born into the OT covenant community, baptism should be given only to those who have been born again. Finally, we would see the mode of baptism being advocated by this view (pouring or sprinkling) to be deficient in communicating what baptism is supposed to represent – dying and rising with Christ, which only full immersion really manages to communicate visually (Rom 6:1-4).

Hills Bible Church's Response

We would respectfully engage with someone holding to this view, being wary of calling it “serious error,” unlike the first position, and hope to persuade them towards believer’s baptism by immersion. However, so as not to make it harder to become a member of HBC than it is to enter heaven, we would allow someone who holds this view by Biblical conviction to become a Covenant Member. If you are in this position please speak to the pastor or one of our elders.

View 3 – the Baptist View (Shared by HBC)

Contrary to the prior positions, the Baptist view is that water baptism is something that (a) should be done to believers after conversion, and (b) should be done by full immersion in water, and (c) does not in any way regenerate the person but rather affirms that they have accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. Here is how this position, which is affirmed by HBC, is formulated from the Bible:

1. The typical formula given in the New Testament is "repent and be baptized" (e.g. Acts 2:38; Matt 3:6). Given that an infant is unable to repent, or even understand the basics of the Christian faith, or their need for a Savior, it seems unbiblical to allow them to be baptised.
2. In Romans 6 Paul argues that what happens in water baptism is a vivid picture of what has happened spiritually when we were saved. That is, we died and were buried with Christ and were raised to newness of life in Him. Going down into the waters of baptism beautifully symbolizes this dying to our sin and rising to new life in Christ. This is why we believe in immersion, rather than pouring or sprinkling). It is obvious that baptising infants can in no way successfully act as a metaphor for this dying and rising.
3. Jesus was baptised as an adult man to "fulfil all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). This means that He obediently followed the path of perfect submission to the Father.
4. We enter the covenant community in the NT by new birth, and so the "sign of the covenant" (i.e. baptism) should be given to those who have experienced the new birth (Col 2:9-15).
5. In the Great Commission, we are told to make disciples by baptizing and teaching to obey all that Christ has commanded (Matt 28:18-20). It is impossible to make a disciple of an infant through baptizing and teaching the content of the Christian faith since they are not intellectually capable.

6. Paul baptises believers as soon as he's managed to tell them about Jesus. Repentance had already happened (Acts 19:1-5). While baptism is not necessary to salvation the NT teaches as a model to follow that repentance and belief is immediately followed by baptism.
7. Baptism in the NT is normally a public affair as a way of identifying with Jesus based on what has happened to a person spiritually.
8. The arguments for paedobaptism foreground what is in the background (at least in the NT), and does this at the expense of the clearer texts mentioned above, pointing to believer's baptism.
9. Since baptism is an outward expression of faith in Christ, identified by a changed life, we at HBC baptize children 12 years old and above (preferably late teens). This allows time for faith to be tested and us to assess the credibility of their profession. Church history testifies to this approach.

*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"
(Acts 2:38)*