

# RIVERVIEW CHURCH

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## BAPTISM.

BY JOE TESTA

In ancient times, slaves were often baptized after they were sold to announce to the community that they now had a new master. The early Christians adopted the practice after Jesus commanded it to be done (Matthew 28:18-20) to symbolize their new life in Him and to identify with His death, burial, and resurrection. Like a wedding ceremony, it is an outward demonstration of our inward love and symbolizes our death to the old life (going under water) and resurrection to a new one (rising up out of it). (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Colossians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:4)

## WHAT IS BAPTISM ALL ABOUT?

Baptism is one of two decrees that Jesus gave to His church to perform (the other being the Lord's Supper). Jesus established both baptism and the Lord's Supper as acts of worship. The idea behind baptism is that someone who has become a follower of Jesus has an opportunity to stand before the church community and publicly profess their faith in Christ.

### DOES BAPTISM HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH SALVATION?

No. The Bible couldn't be clearer that salvation is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9) that comes when someone puts his or her faith in Christ (Romans 3:21-22; John 1:12). Sin caused a separation between God and us. Our broken relationship with God is mended because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross. It was on the cross that Jesus took all of our sin onto Himself and for those who respond to His finished work, He makes them righteous (2 Corinthians 5:21). The big theological term that is taught in the New Testament about this idea is the term "justification." Justification simply means that because of Jesus' death for sin and our appropriation of his gift to our life, God renders us "not guilty" for all eternity. We cannot do anything to earn God's favor, including being baptized. Baptism isn't something we do to earn God's forgiveness; but rather, it's a public declaration of Jesus' death on the cross for our sin.

### WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACH ABOUT BAPTISM?

The New Testament teaches that baptism is a picture or a symbol of what has already happened to someone who has put his or her faith in Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Colossians 2:12; 2 Corinthians 5:17). We read:

**WHAT SHALL WE SAY THEN? ARE WE TO CONTINUE IN SIN THAT GRACE MAY ABOUND?  
BY NO MEANS! HOW CAN WE WHO DIED TO SIN STILL LIVE IN IT? 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,  
IN ORDER THAT, JUST AS CHRIST WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD BY THE GLORY OF THE  
FATHER, WE TOO MIGHT WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE.**

ROMANS 6:1-4



The word for baptism in the Greek is the word *baptiso*, which means, “to immerse.” The idea that Paul is presenting is that when you have been immersed into Christ you were immersed into his death. As followers of Jesus, when we put our faith in Christ, the old self is crucified with Jesus (Galatians 2:20). As a person goes under the water, this symbolizes that they are dead to their old life and raised up out of the water to walk in newness of life. Baptism, in a sense, is a Christ follower saying to their church community: “I have believed in Jesus, and I am putting to death the old life and will live the resurrected life of union with Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

## **WHAT WAS THE PRACTICE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH COMMUNITY AS IT RELATES TO BAPTISM?**

Full immersion is significantly bound to the meaning of baptism. In the New Testament, we see baptism is symbolic of the inner work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, a “washing and renewal” (Titus 3:6). Death, burial, and resurrection to newness of life pointed to one’s identification with both Christ and His church. As Robert Saucy has pointed out, “One is not united to the Head (Jesus) without at the same time being united with the body”<sup>2</sup>.

Apart from the mode being connected with the significance of baptism, evidence for immersion is found in the New Testament. Followers of John the Baptist were baptized “in” the Jordan River (Mark 1:5). Jesus’ baptism was one of immersion. Matthew writes that “after being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water” (Matthew 3:16 NASB) showing that his body was fully immersed. The other evidence that we have for full immersion baptism comes from two other places in the New Testament (John 3:23; Acts 8:36). Both references refer to baptisms taking place because there was water available.

### **WHAT IS THE PATTERN OF THE CHURCH IN ACTS AS IT RELATES TO BAPTISM?**

When we look at the book of Acts, we need to note two things to correctly understand what Luke (the writer) wants us to know and do. First, the book of Acts is written as historical-narrative, which means it is a history of the early church as it explodes into existence by the work of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. Second, when we look at historical-narrative, we see a description of what happened as opposed to a prescription for how we are to do something (we look to the epistles in the NT for prescription or doctrine).

As we look at the pattern in the book of Acts, a clear description of baptism can be assessed (Acts 2:38-41; 8:12-13; 8:34-36; 9:18-19; 10:44-48; 16:14-15, 31-33; 18:8; 19:1-6). If you look at every description of what happens in these accounts, someone believes in Jesus and then is baptized.

### **WHY DID JESUS GET BAPTIZED?**

Did Jesus need to get baptized as a next step after becoming a follower of Himself? On the surface, it does seem strange that Jesus would be baptized. Some think he did it to model for us what we need to do, but that wasn’t the primary reason Jesus was baptized. John the Baptist was the camel hair wearing, locust and wild honey-eating prophet who preached repentance to the people of Israel. He was the one who was “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight’” mentioned in the book of Isaiah (Matthew 3:1-3). John’s job was to prepare Israel for the coming Messiah. How would you do that if you didn’t know who that person was? If you look at John 1:32-34, John the Baptist says, “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.” The key reason that Jesus was baptized was so that John the Baptist would know who God’s Messiah was and be able to proclaim Him to all Israel.



## WHY WOULD YOU GET BAPTIZED?

The primary reason anyone would get baptized is obedience. Jesus, after His resurrection, gave a commission to all of those who would follow Him: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20) Baptism is part of obeying Jesus in making disciples. God would not give a command that we would teach to others, but ourselves not obey. That is hypocrisy. Secondly, baptism is a chance to proclaim to the church that you belong to Jesus. It's a chance to proclaim your identity as a child of God, and that your desire, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is to live for Jesus.

### WHAT IF I WAS BAPTIZED AS AN INFANT?

Some traditions baptize infants of believing parents as a covenantal act. These groups link baptism with the Jewish rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant community. As evidence, they would look at household conversions in Acts (16:14-15, 31-33; 18:8) and Colossians 2:11-12, and presume the presence of small children who were baptized. When you look at the practice of the New Testament church, you see no evidence of infant baptism. When you look in the New Testament, we also do not find any command to baptize infants. On the contrary, the clear teaching of the New Testament is that those who have believed in Jesus are to be baptized.<sup>3</sup>

A few arguments speak against the idea of infant baptism. One is that infant baptism was introduced after the apostolic period of the church. Second, when proper emphasis is given to repentance and faith, the maturity of the one being baptized becomes important. Third, infant baptism may create a false sense of security. Some adults might think that they are followers of Jesus because of an act that was performed on them when they were infants.

Most parents who baptize their infants do so with the understanding that they are committing to raise this child as best they can to respond to the message of the gospel and one day be a maturing follower of Jesus. For those who wish to make this commitment, our practice as a church is to dedicate a child.

### HONORING PARENTS AND ADDRESSING ISSUES WITH BAPTIZING CHILDREN

As a church we have one policy and one caution as it relates to baptism.

If you are still living with your parents or are supported by your parents, we ask that you get their blessing first before getting baptized. It's a great chance for you to share your new faith with unbelieving parents. Our heart as a church is to help young people learn to honor and respect their parents.

We want to express gentle caution to parents about having their loving child or children baptized. The main issue has to do with the challenge in discerning if faith is real in a child and if they will be able to remember their baptism. This requires you as a parent to express wisdom and discernment, and we leave the final decision on when a child is ready to be baptized.

## A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO COMMON REACTIONS TO BAPTISM

*"I need to pray about it."*

When we see clear commands in Scripture, we don't need to pray about whether or not it is God's desire for us to do something. We just simply need to obey.



*"I have followed Jesus a long time without getting baptized. I might be perceived as a new believer if I were to get baptized."*

Pride could be a barrier to obeying Jesus. We're told in 1 Peter 5:5 and James 4:6: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Why wouldn't we want grace?

*"I'm not ready yet . . ."*

Baptism isn't something we do because we arrive at a level of maturity. It's a first step of obedience in our relationship with Jesus. We need to be reminded that the gospel is all about the fact that we would never be good enough to be accepted by God. He accepted us while we were sinners. Jesus died for us while we were living in rebellion to God. We need to live in the gospel every day as God's children (1 Corinthians 15:1). We don't need to have our act all together to get baptized. If you wait until you do, you will never obey Jesus in this area.

*"I'm apprehensive to talk to my parents about my desire to get baptized."*

Talking with family about your desire to get baptized can be scary. However, this is an opportunity to share about the decision you've made and about what the Bible teaches about the gospel and about baptism. Your parents do not have to be excited about your desire, but we would like you to have their blessing to get baptized.

*"I struggle with baptism because I come from a different faith tradition and feel conscientiously uncomfortable at this time getting baptized."*

We have lots of people from lots of church backgrounds that join Riverview. We would advise the individual who wrestles at a conscience level with baptism to wait and not be baptized

## END NOTES

1 Swindoll, Charles R. and Roy B. Zuck, Understanding Christian Theology, 1152.

2 Saucy, The Church in God's Program, 195.

3 Swindoll, Charles R. and Roy B. Zuck, Understanding Christian Theology, 1153.

