

# What the Bible Teaches About Baptism

by Glen Davis – <http://glenandpaula.com/writings/> (last revised: 11/24/2012)

## Why Should I Be Baptized?

“Why should I be baptized?” is a reasonable question, but I prefer the question asked by the Ethiopian eunuch: “Look, here is water. **Why shouldn't I be baptized?**” (Acts 8:36). Getting baptized is something that Christians do – it should be your default decision for the following reasons:

### 1) I Should Be Baptized To Obey Jesus

Jesus commanded his apostles to baptize people as they proclaimed the gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), and so we see that he expects new believers to be baptized as part of the process of becoming his disciples.

### 2) I Should Be Baptized To Identify With Jesus

Being baptized is a proclamation of our spiritual union with Christ. Colossians 2:12 says that Christians are “buried with [Jesus] in baptism” and that we are then “raised with him through our faith in the working of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead.” Another way to approach this point is to recognize that Jesus, though without sin, was baptized and thereby identified with us, and we complete the cycle when we are baptized and likewise identify with him.

### 3) I Should Be Baptized To Proclaim My Devotion To Jesus

In 1 Peter 3:21, baptism is described as “the pledge of a clear conscience toward God” (that’s the NIV: some other translations phrase it as “an appeal to God for a good conscience”). Whichever is the better rendering in English, it is clear that baptism is an act of formally giving ourselves to God.

And so if you name Christ as your Lord and have not been baptized, then seize this opportunity and be baptized.

## Does Baptism Actually Wash My Sins Away?

There are verses like Acts 22:16 which say “be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” This seems to indicate that the waters of baptism actually remove the stain of sin, but looking at this verse closely it is clear that immersion in water only has value because it is happening while “calling on the name of the Lord.”

Sin is not water-soluble; it doesn't wash off. What separates a baptism from a bath is the faith of the participant. Ultimately it is the obedient faith that is efficacious, not the water. Baptism is important and should be done, but not because it literally washes sin away - only personal faith in Jesus does that. The key principle to grasp is that the type of faith that leads to the remission of sins is the type of faith that obeys Jesus in being baptized.

## When Should I Be Baptized?

As soon as possible after you believe. Consider these three passages:

1. “Then [Paul and Silas] spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. <sup>33</sup>At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then **immediately he and all his family were baptized**. <sup>34</sup>The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.” (Acts 16:32-34)
2. Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup>As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "**Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?**" <sup>38</sup>And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.” (Acts 8:35-38)
3. When the people heard [the gospel], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup>Peter replied, "**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. <sup>39</sup>The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." <sup>40</sup>With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." <sup>41</sup>Those who accepted his message **were baptized**, and about three thousand were added to their number **that day**. (Acts 2:37-41)

And so we see that baptism is not a spiritual milestone you must prepare yourself for or aspire to once you've reached a certain level of spiritual maturity; in fact, it's the other way around. Hebrew 6:1-2 speaks of baptism as be one of the “elementary teachings of the Christian life” which “lays a foundation” for maturity!

So as Ananias told Paul I say to you: “What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16)

## How Should I Be Baptized?

You should be completely submersed in water. There are several reasons:

### 1) That Is What the Greek Word for Baptism Means.

The word baptize is essentially a transliteration of the Greek word *baptidzo* (βαπτίζω). In English it is used in almost exclusively religious contexts and this has the unfortunate effect of obscuring its meaning. Baptize was not a religious word in ancient Greek. It simply meant to submerge or dip. When you read the New Testament, substitute “dunk” or “immerse” or some other synonym every time you read “baptism” and you'll be fairly close to the intent of the author.

## 2) Jesus Was Baptized By Immersion

Pay attention to the prepositions in this verse: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went **up out of** the water.” Matthew 3:16

Jesus was in the water being baptized, and then he had to come up out of the water when it was completed. Ergo, baptism was by immersion and not sprinkling. This seems to have been the case with other baptisms in that era as well. We can see this pretty clearly in John 3:23, “Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, **because there was plenty of water**, and people were constantly coming to be baptized.”

## 3) Immersion Preserves the Symbolism of Baptism

Being immersed in water is a way of symbolically being buried with Christ. “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 6:3-4, NIV). The burial symbolism is lost with other methods of baptism.

In addition, baptism symbolizes cleansing. Your body is washed in water as an outer portrayal of the way that the blood of Jesus has washed your soul from sin. All of your soul was cleansed, and therefore you should wash all of your body to clearly portray the inner reality.

So whenever possible, choose baptism by immersion. But if you are in a desert or come to Christ on the International Space Station then do the best you can.

## Who Should Baptize Me?

Any believer can perform baptisms. We see this demonstrated in the story of Peter preaching to Cornelius: “The next day Peter started out with them, and **some of the brothers from Joppa** went along.” The Bible then tells of how Cornelius and his family embraced faith, and a very interesting passage follows on the heels of their conversion: “Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So **he ordered that they be baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ.” (Acts 8:23b, Acts 10:47-48a)

Did you see it? Peter did not do the baptisms himself. Peter ordered that the people who came with him - “some of the brothers from Joppa” - should perform the baptisms. They were apparently just some random Christians who were hanging out with Peter when he set out to go preach to Cornelius.

This isn't the only passage in which an apostle shows a reluctance to perform baptisms. Paul said, “I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup>so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. <sup>16</sup>(Yes, I also baptized the

household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup>For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (1 Corinthians 1:14-17)

And so we see that the person you are baptized by is much less important than the faith that led you to be baptized. Having said that, there is nothing wrong with wanting your pastor to baptize you – as long as you don't think the baptism is any more effective as a result of it.

## **What If I Was Baptized As An Infant?**

Here's the short answer: were you immersed in water as an act of personal obedience to Jesus? No? Then be baptized.

Here's the slightly longer answer. There are two possible trajectories your life has taken to this point: you either rejected the faith of your parents and are now embracing it as an adult, or you have been devoted to Christ as long as you can remember.

If you rejected your childhood faith, then the choice is straightforward. You should be baptized.

If, on the other hand, your faith seems continuous from your earliest days then you might be wondering, “What's the rush? I've been following Jesus just fine for years now. I see evidence of the Spirit working in my life. Being baptized would just offend my parents.”

Perhaps all those things are true, but they are beside the point. The chief question which should concern you is this: does the Bible command me to be baptized? If it does, then obey the Bible.

Perhaps you still feel conflicted. Here are two questions to ask yourself:

- Were you baptized by immersion? Almost certainly not, as most denominations that practice infant baptism merely sprinkle the children with water. In the words of a pastor I know, “You weren't baptized – you were dry cleaned!”
- Were you old enough to comprehend and assent to what you were doing? If not, then you didn't obey Jesus; someone else tried to obey Jesus for you. Even those denominations which practice infant baptism recognize this problem. Their solution is to supplement infant baptism with an adolescent ceremony called confirmation. The problem is that such a two-stage process isn't a Biblical concept.

Unless you can answer yes to both questions, you should be baptized now as a self-aware and obedient believer.

## **So Get Baptized**

In summary, the Bible simply assumes that everyone who has placed their faith in Jesus has also been baptized. Consider Galatians 3:26-27, “So in Christ Jesus you are all

children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Search the New Testament and you cannot find the idea of a unbaptized believer. The sole exception is the thief on the cross who died after placing his faith in Jesus. As far as we can tell, every other follower of Christ had been baptized – usually on the very day of their conversion.

And so if you haven’t been baptized, go and find a fellow believer who will baptize you. It doesn’t matter if it is a pastor, the person who led you to Christ, or your roommate. Just do it.

When possible do it publicly as part of the life of the community you’re a part of. There are lots of reasons for this. A big one is that it gives you an excuse to invite your family and friends to join you at church and hear the gospel and also to hear your testimony (the giving of which is customary at most baptisms).

Just send your friends an email like this: “This may come as a surprise to some of you, but I’ve recently become a Christian. I’m going to be baptized tomorrow night on campus and I’d like you to come celebrate with me, whether you share my newfound faith or not. The service will run from X to X and we’ll go grab a bite afterwards. Dress is casual.”

You should also let your family know that you intend to be baptized and give them an opportunity to join you. They will likely want to be there even if they do not share your faith in Jesus. This may mean a delay of weeks before you are able to schedule your baptism. That’s fine as long as your heart is willing to be baptized immediately and you are simply waiting as a way of showing honor to your family.

Regardless, celebrate this opportunity to make a strong, public statement about your faith in Jesus. This won’t make you any more of a Christian than you were before being baptized, but it will be one additional step on your journey to being conformed to the image of Christ.

Go get baptized.