

The Believer and Baptism

(Pastor Position Paper)

1. We believe in baptism

We believe that baptism is the visible sign of entrance into the universal church. It is a public declaration of the sinner's cleansing from sin,¹ and his dying and rising with Christ.

And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and *wash away your sins*, calling on his name (Acts 22:16).

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an *appeal to God for a good conscience*, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).²

³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were *baptized into his death*? ⁴ 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 6:3-4).

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been *buried with him in baptism*, in which you were also *raised* with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:11-12).

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have *put on Christ* (Galatians 3:27).

2. We believe baptism is important

Baptism is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, and as such is an "ordinance."³ It is not a "hoop" to be jumped through but a command to be obeyed.⁴ However, it is not necessary for salvation (see below).

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 (Matthew 28:19).

¹ The same is true of John's baptism. "And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*" (Mark 1:5).

² ¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water" (1 Peter 3:18-20).

³ An "ordinance" is something ordained, commanded, by Christ. We do not believe that baptism is a "sacrament." If baptism were sacramental, it would confer God's grace on people and would regenerate them apart from their faith. This, we believe, is salvation by works and incompatible with Scripture (see below).

⁴ We do not believe that baptism in the New Testament was a ritual for entrance into a local church or denomination. However, baptism is an act of obedience, and as such may be one of many indicators of a believer's commitment of growth toward holiness, which may have a role in local church membership today.

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).

In Church history we can see the value of baptism. For centuries it was taught that people became members of the church at birth, and were regenerated in infant baptism despite their lack of personal faith. Contrary to this, evangelicalism insisted that conversion was necessary for salvation, and this conviction came to be epitomized by many in the insistence on believer’s baptism, specifically immersion as opposed to infant baptism.

3. We believe baptism should be connected with conversion

In Scripture we see that baptism is firmly connected with conversion. Peter told the Jews at Pentecost that they should “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2: 38). The Ethiopian eunuch requested baptism immediately upon Philip’s teaching (Acts 8:36; see below). Paul baptized the Philippian jailer the same night as his conversion (Acts 16:33).

Because baptism is part of conversion in that it is the public proclamation of what happens in conversion, the biblical writers can refer to baptism when speaking of entire conversion process. This is why Paul can speak of baptism as a “burial with” and a “rising with” Christ, events that actually occur at point of faith (Romans 6:3-4).

Although there are no examples of delayed baptism in Scripture, we do recognize that parents may want to delay their children’s baptism until a time in which the parents are sure of the reality of that conversion.

4. We believe in baptism by immersion

We believe that starting with John the Baptist, baptism was the immersion of the person under the water, and this “mode” is the only mode witnessed to in the New Testament.

1. The Greek word *baptizo* can mean “dip” in the sense of “wash” (Mark 7:4), but its predominant use is to “immerse, drench, overwhelm, sink, drown.”⁵

2. Mentions of baptism usually include the imagery of going *down into* the water and coming *up out of* the water, or there being much water.

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him *in the river Jordan*, confessing their sins (Mark 1:5).

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John *in the Jordan*. ¹⁰ And when he came *up out of* the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1:9-10).

John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, *because water was plentiful there*, and people were coming and being baptized (John 3:23).

³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to *some water*, and the eunuch said, “See, *here is water!* What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went *down into the water*, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came *up out of the water*, the Spirit

⁵ Greek has a word “to sprinkle,” *rhantizo*, that is never used of baptism (cf. Heb 9:13,19,21; possibly 10:22).

of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:36-39).

3. Immersion best symbolizes the meaning of baptism, both the believer's cleansing from sin as well as his dying with Christ and being raised to a new life (see #1 above).⁶

While we believe that immersion is the only mode witnessed to in the New Testament and best symbolizes the meaning of baptism, we do recognize that the New Testament never demands only one mode of baptism. This may be because there was no controversy on this point, but it may also be that the mode is not essential. Therefore, while we baptize only by immersion, we will accept as baptized those who were baptized as believers by sprinkling or effusion.

5. We believe in baptism for believers only

Because baptism is a public declaration of the reality of conversion that has happened in a person's heart, only those who have truly become disciples of Christ by confession of their own faith should be baptized. This is the clear teaching of Scripture with no clear teaching to the contrary.

[In him also you were] ... buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him *through faith* in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:12).

³⁸ 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 ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, *everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*" ... ⁴¹ So those who *received his word* were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:38-39, 41).

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 (Acts 8:12).

⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, *who have received the Holy Spirit* just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:47-48).

³² And they *spoke the word of the Lord* to him and to all who were in his house.

³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his

⁶ It is possible that the imagery is even stronger than this. Going down into the waters of baptism is descending into the waters of judgment and death, and coming out of the water may be the indication that the believer has passed through judgment because of what Christ has done for him on the cross. This is how baptism "corresponds to" the saving of Noah and his family in 1 Peter 3:21.

It is most likely that John developed his understanding of baptism from the Jewish ritual of proselyte baptism (although the Old Testament cultic washings may have played a part). In proselyte baptism, the Gentile died to his old life and became a new person, a Jew. The force of John's baptism is then that being Jewish is not sufficient preparation for entering the kingdom of God, that they must still repent of their sins, and in a sense become a new person as they wait for God's Messiah. Because Christian baptism is most likely rooted in John's baptism, this idea of dying to what you were and becoming a new person strengthens the imagery in Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12 and strengthens the case for the imagery of immersion.

house and set food before them. And he *rejoiced along with his entire household* that he had believed in God (Acts 16:32-34).

There are a few references to baptism where faith is not explicitly stated, but that does not mean faith was not present. The Ethiopian eunuch surely believed Philip's testimony (Acts 8:12). We later learn that Stephanas' household were the first converts in Achaia.

^{1:14} I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ^{1:15} so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ^{1:16} (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ... ^{16:15} You know that the household of Stephanas were the *first converts* in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints (1 Corinthians 1:14-16; 16:15).

In light of this evidence, the so-called "household baptisms" must have been household conversions, as is explicitly stated in Acts 16:14-15 and 1 Corinthians 1:16 (cf. 16:15). This provides the context for assuming Lydia's household also believed.⁷

¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was *baptized, and her household* as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us (Acts 16:14-15).

6. We do not believe baptism is necessary for salvation

While baptism is necessary for obedience, it is not necessary for salvation. Salvation is through God's mercy and grace, by faith alone. Most of the passages that discuss baptism explicitly mention faith. To require baptism for salvation is to run counter to the plain teaching of Scripture, and in fact invoke Paul's anathema for teaching salvation by works of the law (Galatians 1:8-9).

⁸ For by *grace* you have been saved *through faith*. And this is *not your own doing*; it is the *gift* of God, ⁹ *not a result of works*, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

For the wages of sin is death, but the *free* gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

1 Peter 3:21 explicitly shows that the ritual of baptism does not save but rather the appeal (or "pledge") of a good conscience does. This "pledge" is an appeal for God's redemptive work in the believer's life, hence, conversion.

7. We believe any believer can administer baptism

Because baptism is a visible sign of a person's entry into the body of Christ, and because all believers are priests (1 Peter 2:9), any believer can administer baptism. However, other members of the body should be present because it symbolizes entrance into the body of Christ, includes a profession of faith that strengthens all present, and the person will be held accountable for his profession by those who hear it (Romans 6:1-14).

⁷ What also is not stated is whether any of her household were infants or children (cf. John 4:53; Acts 18:8). the same is true of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:32-34).