

Baptism

The Meaning of Baptism

The word we translate as baptism is the Greek word *baptizó* and literally means “to plunge, dip, or immerse” something. It was used even before Christ to refer to clothes being immersed in colored dye or to submerging pickles into vinegar to make cucumbers. There are times in the New Testament where the word is used to give another meaning, but in its most common reading, the word itself means a full immersion of something.

The Method of Baptism

Immediately within the first few chapters of Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s gospels, we see a man named John the Baptist baptizing people in the Jordan River¹. Each account records Jesus approaching John, asking to be baptized, and John baptizing Jesus in the river.

A couple of things are important to point out: (1) Because John was baptizing in the Jordan River, the method of baptism he was using was likely a full immersion into the water. It’s not likely he used another method (e.g. sprinkling) since he was inviting people into a large body of water. He wouldn’t have baptized in a body of water if a jar of water or a water well would have sufficed. (2) Matthew and Mark specifically describe Jesus as coming *out of the water*², indicating Jesus was fully submerged for His baptism.

Not only with Jesus, but with the early church we see the picture of baptism being a full immersion into the water. The book of Acts records the Holy Spirit’s ministry through the Church after Jesus’ ascension. Acts 8 tells the story of a believer named Philip interacting with a man from Ethiopia who was riding in a chariot. The Ethiopian was reading an Old Testament passage that foretold Jesus’ death on the cross (specifically, Isaiah 53:7–8).

Philip explained how the passage the Ethiopian was reading was fulfilled in Jesus, and “... as they were going along the road they came to some water and the [Ethiopian] said, ‘See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?’ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water...and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:36–38, emphasis added). Like Jesus, the Ethiopian had to enter a body of water to be baptized, indicating he was fully submerged.

These are just two examples, but the point in stating them is to see that the Scriptures give us the repeated example of baptism by immersion.

The Imagery of Baptism

All these scriptures that describe the method of baptism also show that Jesus and the early Church saw baptism as the full immersion of a person into the water. Another way we know this is by the beautiful symbolism the biblical authors use to compare baptism with the new life a person receives in Christ. Baptism is often seen as a symbolic representation of our old sinful nature dying and our new nature rising in Christ. For example, Paul says in Romans 6:3–4:

¹ You can read these accounts for yourself in Matthew 3:1–12; Mark 1:1–8; and Luke 3:1–20

² Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:10

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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

Similarly, Paul tells the Colossians, “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 2:12, emphasis added). The point is not that baptism brings us from spiritual death into spiritual life, but that through immersion we physically represent the spiritual reality that took place when God saved us.

When we believed in Christ, our old nature was been buried with Christ in His death, and now we are resurrected into a new life with Him. There is no other way to symbolize this except through being fully immersed in the water. Baptism by immersion best communicates this inward spiritual reality in a way that other methods, like sprinkling or pouring, cannot.

While there are certain elements of God’s saving work that these methods can portray (e.g. they both communicate a type of cleansing), the New Testament issues immersion as the method of baptism, because it best communicates the full reality of being born again in Christ.

Because of this, baptism is something that always occurs after salvation—not before or simultaneous with it. The Scriptures do not say or indicate that baptism has any power to save someone from their sin or that it is something that must be added to make salvation complete. The Bible is clear: Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone with no works of any kind needed.

Who Should Be Baptized?

Because of these considerations, we believe every follower of Jesus ought to be baptized by immersion as a step of humble obedience. Even if believers have experienced a different version of baptism in the past, because of the reasons we’ve outlined, immersion is the appropriate means God has given us to be baptized. In our efforts to honor Christ and be faithful to His Word, those who have experienced new life in Him should follow His instruction to be baptized as a way to declare this change publicly.

Facing Some Difficult Issues

Having said that, if you’re a believer who’s experienced another method of baptism in your life, then you may have some trouble accepting what we’ve just said. Perhaps you were sprinkled as a child in a different denomination. Let us be clear: we stand with you and affirm the spiritual and personal significance of that event in your life. In no way do we want to diminish or invalidate the importance of what has already taken place.

Our heart is simply to show you what the Scriptures teach regarding baptism and invite you to consider being baptized by the means God has provided.

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If you still have a struggle with this particular issue and choose not to be baptized by immersion, then we want you to know you are still a welcome and valuable part of this fellowship.

Baptism may be something you want to take some time to think about, and if that's the case, we are happy to give you the space you need. We're available for any questions you may have. In the meantime, stay connected—learn, grow, pray, and worship with us. Whatever your decision may be, we will gladly share life with you.

However, if you are convinced baptism by immersion *is* the next step for you but have come from a different denominational background, you may be anxious about how your family will respond. This is understandable and something we respect greatly. While we can't address all the issues that may come up when you discuss this with your family, we would like to suggest the following:

- Express your desire to be faithful to God's Word—even if you are met with resistance. Seeking to honor God is something He honors in return (see Luke 18:29–30).
- Pray for wisdom to approach and navigate the conversation, specifically asking God to give you the words to speak and a sense of His peace throughout the conversation.
- Let them know this is something you're doing to express *your* personal relationship with Christ, which is very important to you.
- Rest in His grace. Remember that even in the face of difficulty, God's grace and love for you in Christ are enough.³

Conclusion

We sincerely hope this brings clarity and understanding to what Stonegate Fellowship believes about baptism and why we believe it. We pray it has been helpful and encouraging to you, and we hope you'll continue to ask any questions you still have.

Regardless of where you land on this issue, we encourage you to do the following:

- **Attend our Baptism class.** We have separate classes for adults, youth, and kids. It is held almost every month on the 3rd Sunday and you can find out more information about this by going to the information desk in the foyer or going online to www.stonegatefellowship.com.
- **Attend an Elements service.** This is the service where we baptize people who want to publicly profess their faith in Jesus. It's an incredible time of celebration and encouragement, and we would love for you to come to one of these evenings to see the declarations of others who have entrusted their lives to Jesus.

³ *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. — 2 Corinthians 12:9*