

## Door of Hope Northeast

# Introduction to Baptism

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19-20

For nearly two thousand years followers of Jesus have participated in the ancient and sacred symbol of baptism in obedience to his teaching. No one can read the New Testament without realizing that baptism held an important place in the life of the early church. In the book of Acts, when an individual became a Christian, he or she was immediately baptized. In fact one scholar has observed that in the New Testament we never find even the idea of a Christian who has not been baptized.<sup>1</sup> However, what was once a source of celebration for New Testament Christians has become, through the centuries, a cause of division and disunity, with a bewildering variety of practices and beliefs. Some baptize infants; others baptize only older children and adults. Some baptize by sprinkling a few drops of water on a person, while others pour water, and still others immerse the person under the water. Some groups teach that baptism is essential for salvation, while others insist that baptism must not be understood as a means of salvation.

We want to make it clear that a particular form or understanding of baptism is not a requirement for being a part of or serving at Door of Hope Northeast. The particular method or details of baptism are not a core belief of the Christian faith<sup>1</sup>, and there is room for difference of opinion. However, because the Bible is clear about the basics of baptism, many who come to Door of Hope Northeast have serious questions about it. There are six questions that people frequently have about baptism at Door of Hope Northeast:

1. What is the meaning and purpose of baptism?
2. Who is baptism for?
3. Why should someone be baptized?
4. How exactly should baptism be done?
5. Where do people get baptized?
6. At what age can a child be baptized?

We'll try to answer each in turn below.

### 1. WHAT IS THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF BAPTISM?

The meaning of baptism is the most important question to answer. Some Christians have taught that baptism is essential for salvation. At Door of Hope, we believe that baptism is very important, but it is not essential for salvation. Salvation comes through faith alone in Christ alone (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9).

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 77

In Romans 1:16, Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." The power of God for salvation is the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul defines the gospel as being the story of Jesus Christ dying for our sins, being buried, and then raised to new life from the dead. Some people would insist that baptism is also a part of the gospel that saves people. However, in 1 Corinthians 1:17 Paul clearly distinguishes the difference between the gospel and baptism when he says, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel." In Paul's mind there was a difference. That passage also states that Paul did not baptize many in the Corinthian church, a fact that is hard to understand if baptism were essential for salvation.

On the very first occasion the gospel was preached to non-Jewish people, it was Peter who shared the story with a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10). As Peter declared the gospel to a group of Cornelius' family and friends in Caesarea, he said: "Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Apparently, their hearts opened to receive the message because "the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message" (Acts 10:44). They had become believers in Christ and had received the gift of eternal life. "So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48). The order of these events is of great importance. These people were baptized not in order to receive the Spirit or the gift of salvation, but because they already had been saved. Baptism did not accomplish their salvation; it came after their salvation.

What is the meaning of this symbolic action of being immersed in water? Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible, life transformation. When someone trusts in Jesus Christ for their salvation they are "baptized" into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-4). What exactly this means is a subject of some discussion. I believe that the apostle Paul is referring to something that is spiritual that happens to every person who transfers their faith to Jesus Christ and him alone for their salvation. In effect, the Holy Spirit unites us to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. We are "baptized into Christ" (Galatians 3:27). This is an inward, invisible transformation of our life. It is real, but we cannot see it. Water baptism pictures that invisible baptism. When we are baptized (immersed in water) we are completely covered with water. We are "clothed" with water. This illustrates what happens to us when the Holy Spirit baptizes us into Christ, we are "clothed in Christ" (Galatians 3:27). Water baptism is a visible picture of what has already happened in an invisible way.

People who believe that baptism is essential for salvation confuse the important outward act (water baptism) with the essential life changing and invisible work of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, baptism consistently followed a declaration of faith. In practice, the two things were tightly linked, but they were not one and the same thing. For example, I cannot remember ever performing a wedding in which the couples have not exchanged rings. In practice, the vows and the rings are inseparable. But according to the law they are separable. It is the vow that establishes the marriage bond. The wedding ring is the outward sign of the invisible bond. The ring is important but it is not essential. I lost my wedding ring once, but I still remained married to my wife even though for many months I did not have a ring on my finger.

Baptism is like that. We are saved entirely on the basis of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. We are saved through faith, a total reliance upon the Lord. 5 Baptism is an outward expression of that inward reality. Without faith, baptism is meaningless. With faith, baptism becomes the dramatic expression of the inward reality.

Baptism then is a symbol of salvation, not a cause of it or an anticipation of it. It is the visible sign to God, to believers, and to the world of our faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

## 2. WHO IS BAPTISM FOR?

The biggest difference between various church traditions focuses on the question of whether baptism is for believers only or whether infants should be baptized.

The clear pattern in the New Testament is that baptism is for those who give a clear statement of faith in Jesus and who have committed to follow him. This view is often called "believers' baptism," since it holds that only those who actually believe in and follow Jesus should be baptized. A quick survey of the book of Acts makes this clear. After Peter's sermon at Pentecost, we read, "Those who received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). Similarly, when Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, we read, "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). Likewise, when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius' home, he allowed baptism for those who had "heard" the word and "received the Holy Spirit." Therefore, for those who had demonstrated similar things that had happened to Peter and the early church at the beginning of the church (Pentecost). Peter said, "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Then Peter "commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:44-47). In every case, baptism was for those who heard the gospel, trusted Jesus Christ for their salvation, and committed to follow him.

These passages reveal a consistent New Testament pattern. As soon as someone makes a declaration of faith in Christ they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes they were even baptized immediately (see Acts 8:36-38; 9:17-18; 16: 32-34; 18:8; 19:4-5).

If the New Testament is so clear, where does the practice of infant baptism come from? One scholar, Kurt Aland, has determined after an extensive study of early Christian literature, that no one can provide conclusive evidence of an infant baptism before A.D. 200. It was after that time that it became a prevalent practice of the church.

Both Roman Catholics and some Protestant denominations practice infant baptism. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism (often called "christening") should be administered to infants, because it is believed to be necessary for the salvation and regeneration of the child. Ludwig Ott, in his *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, explains that through the sacrament of baptism a person is "spiritually reborn," which is why it must be performed by a priest. Essential to the Roman Catholic view of baptism is the belief that the sacraments work independently of the faith of the people participating in the sacrament. According to this view, baptism confers grace even on infants who do not have the ability to place their faith in Christ.

Many Protestants have also practiced infant baptism, sometimes referred to as paedobaptism (the prefix paedo- means "child" and is derived from the Greek word pais, "child"). In this view, all infant children of believing parents are baptized, for two main reasons. It is first based on the belief that infant baptism is the Christian counterpart to Jewish circumcision, the initiatory rite that made a child a member of the covenant people of Israel. Circumcision was administered to all Israelite males when they were eight days old. It is often said that Colossians 2:11-12 makes this connection. However, there are strong reasons for doubting that the early Christians believed baptism was the replacement for circumcision. In the first century, some Jewish Christians demanded that the Gentile Christians should be circumcised (see Acts 15:1). In that discussion no one argued that baptism had replaced circumcision. Jewish Christians did not stop circumcising their children. Even Timothy, a leader in the early Church was circumcised as an adult even though he had already been baptized as a Christian (Acts 16:3). This is difficult to explain if baptism had taken the place of circumcision.

A second argument for infant baptism is the fact that the New Testament in two places speaks of an individual "and their household" being baptized (see Acts 16:14-15; 16:30-34 and 1 Corinthians 1:16). The implication is that the households would have had infants, but that is not stated in the text at all. As today, only a fraction of households have infants. More importantly, in Acts 8 16:34 it is said that the whole family believed in Christ, and the same is true of Acts 18:8 where "Crispus and his entire household believed." These words clearly indicate that everyone in their household had come to faith in Christ. These passages simply do not contain any information about whether there were infants in the households or not. It is ambiguous evidence for infant baptism.

In a casual reading of the New Testament, there is a clear and unbreakable connection between belief and baptism. Someone places their faith in Christ and then is baptized. Infant baptism, however, changes that connection. Obviously, an infant cannot make a statement of faith, and a parent's or a grandparent's faith is not the same thing as a personal faith. The shift from believer's baptism to infant baptism after the third century was probably well-intentioned. Most parents mean only good things when they have their infants baptized. Even so, this practice disconnects the faith of the person from baptism, and this is the opposite of the New Testament pattern.

Sometimes the question arises from those who were baptized before they ever made a commitment to believe in and follow Jesus: should they be baptized as believers? Clearly this is a personal matter, and we encourage you to pray and seek sound advice about this question. In many cases at Door of Hope people come to see that their baptism as a believer can be a powerful statement to their friends, children, or other family members of their personal faith in Christ and their commitment to be his devoted follower.

### **3. WHY SHOULD SOMEONE BE BAPTIZED?**

First, Jesus made it very clear to his first followers that they were to baptize any and all people who made a commitment to follow him: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is therefore, an act of obedience for anyone who claims to follow Christ. It is not an act of duty,

however. Baptism is an expression of our love for our Lord, because Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" (John 14:23).

Second, baptism also becomes a power statement to our friends and family that we have indeed transferred our trust to Jesus Christ for our salvation. Since we share the gospel at every baptism, baptism becomes a visible picture of what happens to someone who has believed the gospel. People will remember that you are a Christian because they saw you being baptized.

Third, baptism is a concrete, tangible reminder to ourselves that we have, indeed, committed to follow Christ by placing our faith in him.

#### 4. HOW EXACTLY SHOULD BAPTISM BE DONE?

It is almost certain that the practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out by immersion as the person is placed completely under water, and then brought back up again. Sometimes this is referred to as the mode of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament. This seems clear for the following reasons:

First, the Greek word baptizo means, "to plunge, dip, immerse" something in water. This is the commonly recognized and standard meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside the Bible.

Second, the meaning of "immersion" makes the clearest sense in several New Testament passages. In Mark 1:5, people were baptized by John "in the river Jordan." Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized "he came up out of the water" (Mark 1:10). The fact that John and Jesus went into the river and came up out of it strongly suggests immersion, since sprinkling or pouring of water could much more readily have been done standing beside the river. In another place we see that John the Baptist "was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water there" (John 3:23). Again, it would not take "plenty of water" to baptize people by sprinkling, but it would take plenty of water to baptize people by immersion. (See also Acts 8:36).

Third, the symbolism of union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection seems to require baptism by immersion. Paul tells the Colossians, "having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12). This truth is symbolized best the act of immersion. When someone goes down into the water, it is a picture of going down into the grave and being buried with Christ. Coming up out of the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life (cf. Romans 6:3-4). Baptism by sprinkling or pouring simply misses this symbolism.

Sometimes we're asked, "what if a person cannot be immersed for medical reasons?" In those cases, I ask the candidate for the baptism to instruct me as to what would be physically safe for them. In each case, the person instructed me to get them as wet as possible by pouring water all over them. These are wonderful exceptions and have become some of my most treasured pictures of a person's total commitment to the spirit of the New Testament practice.

## **5. WHERE DO PEOPLE GET BAPTIZED?**

The place for baptisms at Door of Hope depends on the time of year. In the Summer we do them at an outdoor park on the Willamette River. Other times of year we use the facilities of another church. We usually only have about three-four baptisms events per year. This will be changing, as you may have noticed we now have a baptismal available to us in the sanctuary! We are now able to hold regular baptisms in the sanctuary, but are still deciding how regularly these will take place.

At Door of Hope, we want to respect the genuine and sincere differences that exist between Christians on the subject of baptism. As we've have indicated, we welcome all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to join us. A specific experience of baptism is not required as a condition of being a part of Door of Hope, but we also want people to think seriously and biblically about baptism.

## **6. AT WHAT AGE CAN A CHILD BE BAPTIZED?**

Many children are capable of understanding the story of the gospel. However, children are also very concrete thinkers. Many are not capable of understanding the nuances of the meaning of baptism. The concept of baptism as a visible representation of something that happens to us spiritually is very abstract. It is important for someone getting baptized to fully understand that baptism connects us with Christ in a unique way, while at the same time it is not tied to our salvation. For children, that can be confusing.

Moreover, though children are capable of having an authentic faith, their faith is also very tied to their parents' faith and influence. Many children who grow up in Christian homes struggle with their Christian identity when they reach adulthood. It can be difficult to remember when or if their faith became their own choice and not just their parents' choice.

Baptism is an opportunity for Christians to have a faith marker. It confirms a time they declared their faith as their own. When adults who were baptized as children reflect on the experience, it can be difficult for them to remember the experience well. It is easy to feel foggy about whether the baptism was a choice that they truly understood and whether it was a choice that was truly their own. Even if it seemed clear when they were a child, upon later reflection, their baptism does not feel like it was a significant step that they chose to take.

Though Jesus asks believers to be baptized, he does not say that it has to done by a certain age, or a certain amount of time after believing in him. We want to ensure that people getting baptized fully understand the choice they are making. We also want to ensure that it occurs in such a way that provides a significant and memorable marker for their spiritual journey. Therefore, we strongly recommend that children wait until they are in 5th grade before being baptized at Door of Hope Northeast.

In addition, parents are invited to participate in a Parent/Child Dedication at Door of Hope Northeast. A few times a year parents publicly present their children to God and make a commitment to bring their children up in a Christian home. This is a parent's act of dedication,

making a spiritual commitment to God on behalf of their child, as well as an invitation to the church community to commit to helping support this family in the faith.

If you feel that your child has a good reason for being baptized earlier than 5th grade, please contact one of the pastors and they would be happy to have a conversation with you.

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Should you desire to be baptized or would like to discuss baptism with one of the staff or elders, please contact Cameron Heger at [cameron@doorofhopepdx.org](mailto:cameron@doorofhopepdx.org). Thank you for taking the time to read this. We hope that it has helped you understand why we do what we do at Door of Hope when it comes to the important and sometimes controversial subject of baptism.