

Baptism

Our Key Biblical and Theological Convictions



Village Bible Church
DISTINCTIVES

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Baptism

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 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. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Colossians 2:8-15

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. We live in an increasingly visually-oriented society. What people hear is often impactful, but what they both hear and then see demonstrated before their very eyes impacts them all the more. Water baptism is just such a picture.

When we are born physically, we are automatically identified with the earthly nation into which we are born. When the Holy Spirit of God brings us to life spiritually in Christ, the Bible says we are born again. At the moment the Holy Spirit gave us spiritual birth – that is, at the moment we repented of our sins and trusted Christ's death as payment for them – at that very moment we were placed (baptized, dipped, immersed) into Christ's Body (the Church universal), the present manifestation of God's Kingdom (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13).

Once we have trusted Christ as our Savior, the Scriptures command us to give public testimony of our faith by means of water baptism. Water baptism is God's creative way of picturing our salvation. It helps us visualize what happened to us when we were born again. Water baptism, like a picture, helps us tell others what Christ did for us on Calvary and openly identifies us with Him. Through water baptism, we are publicly identifying ourselves with Christ – with His death, His burial and His resurrection (Romans 6:1-5).

Water baptism in no way contributes to our spiritual birth. It simply bears witness to the fact that we have trusted Christ and have been born again. It is, in essence, the first step in discipleship – the first step in following Jesus as our Master and Lord.

Who should be baptized?

All who can genuinely answer yes to the following questions should be baptized:

1. Are you a sinner deserving of God's eternal judgment?
2. Do you believe that Jesus is God's Son, sent to save sinners by His perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection?
3. Have you repented of your sins and placed your faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins and for the fulfillment of all His promises to you, even eternal life?
4. Do you now desire to place yourself under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and do you intend by faith to follow Jesus as Lord and obey his teachings?

1. Meaning and Importance of Baptism

The meaning and importance of baptism are integrally related to the death of Jesus Christ, God's Son, for our sins, and to His resurrection from the dead, which guarantees new life now, as well as eternal life.

Baptism:

1. is commanded by Jesus;
2. is a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ;
3. is symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
4. is symbolic of what God has accomplished in the life of a believer;
5. is symbolic of our washing / cleansing from sin;
6. is a symbolic entrance point into the Body of Christ, the Church;
7. is for believers only;
8. is by immersion in water;
9. is to be administered in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit;
10. is a blessing.

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord by which those who have repented and come to faith express their union with Christ in His death and resurrection. They do so by being immersed in water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign of belonging to the new people of God, the church, and is an emblem of burial and cleansing, signifying death to the old life of unbelief and purification from the pollution of sin.

2. Baptism is an act of obedience to the Lord's command and follows His example.

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord. What we mean by this is that the Lord Jesus commanded it—He ordained it—in a way that would make it an ongoing practice of the church. We find this most explicitly stated in Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus told His disciples, *“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.”*

“Make disciples” is the main verb of this command, while the defining participles are “baptizing” and “teaching.” So the church is commanded to do these things for all disciples. Making disciples necessarily includes baptizing them.

The time frame during which these activities are to be carried out is made clear by the promise of Christ's help in verse 20: *“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Because this promise of help continues for as long as this age lasts, the command He promises to help us carry out is to be obeyed as long as this age lasts.

So baptism is a command, an ordinance, of the Lord Jesus, to be performed as a part of making disciples until Christ returns at the end of the age.

(cf. Acts 2:38, Matthew 3:13-17)

3. Baptism is a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ

In baptism we express, with our whole body, our heart's acceptance of Christ's Lordship. Becoming a Christian involves the body as well as the heart. In conversion the heart is freed from sin to be enslaved to God (Roman 6:12-13). Since the Lordship of Christ lays claim to our whole body, it is fitting for us to express our surrender to His Lordship with our whole body. Baptism gives expression that we are God's from head to toe.

Baptism also expresses union with Christ in His death and resurrection.

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.

Faith is the means by which we are united to Christ and justified. We signify and symbolize this faith through the act of baptism. Faith unites to Christ; baptism symbolizes this union.

In baptism, by faith, we are united with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Baptism dramatically portrays what happened spiritually when you received Christ: Your old self of unbelief and rebellion and idolatry died, and a new you of faith and

submission and treasuring Christ came into being. That's what you confess to the world and to heaven when you are baptized.

How important is our baptism? It is our personal identification with the greatest act of human history – the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism doesn't save us – salvation comes by faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our guilt before God is removed the moment we trust in Christ. But baptism is our personal testimony to – and the inward assurance of – our passage from the old life to the new life.

When a person gets married, he or she almost always begins to wear a wedding ring. Although the ring itself is not what makes someone married, it is more than a piece of ornamental jewelry. It represents the solemn commitment of a man and a woman to become husband and wife. It is a public testimony to that commitment. It identifies a wife with her husband and a husband with his wife. It is a public symbol of a private commitment. Likewise, when people are baptized, they are publicly identifying with Jesus Christ. Their baptism is an outward symbol of an inward commitment.

4. Baptism is symbolic of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In baptism, we are memorializing what took place in our life at the time of our conversion to Christ (Romans 6:3-5; 1 Corinthians 12:13) – that we died to ourselves and were resurrected to new life in Christ. Additionally, baptism is a visual proclamation of the gospel story of Christ's death, burial and resurrection in dramatic form (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

5. Baptism is symbolic of what God has accomplished in the life of a believer.

Baptism is a symbol of the spiritual change that God has worked in our lives. It is a transition from spiritual and eternal death to spiritual and eternal life. It is moving from hopelessness into hopefulness, from darkness into light, and from slavery to sin to freedom in Christ. In baptism we symbolically express our acceptance of death with Christ, putting an end to our old way of life and rising with Christ to begin a new kind of life in Him. Explain this using the texts below.

(Romans 6:3-11, Colossians 2:9-14)

6. Baptism is symbolic of our washing / cleansing from sin.

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name. (Acts 22:16)

7. Baptism is a symbolic entrance point into the Body of Christ, the Church.

The meaning of baptism is woven together with becoming part of the people of God. And since the local church is an expression of that people, baptism is closely connected with entering formally into the fellowship of a local church. In the New Testament, being a Christian, being baptized, belonging to the new-covenant people of God and being formally identified with a local church, were linked together. (Acts 2:41, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

8. Baptism is for believers only.

Since baptism is a symbol of beginning the Christian life, we should only baptize when there is evidence of new birth and the candidate is able to give a credible profession of faith in Christ. (It is not something that an unbeliever can do, nor is it something that an infant can do. That is why we don't baptize infants. For further biblical explanation of why we do not baptize infants, see Q&A below.)

Every Biblical example is of adults who had previously placed their faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41; 8:30-39; 10:44-48; 16:31-34). (One could infer that the Philippian Jailer's family included children, but this is speculation as it is not explicit within the text.)

9. Baptism is immersion into water.

We believe this expression of union with Christ in death and resurrection happens by being immersed in water. The clearest evidence for this is the words of Romans 6:3-4, which describe the act of baptism as burial and rising from the dead. This is most naturally understood to mean that we are buried under water and then come out from the water to signify rising from the grave.

The word "baptize" in Greek means *dip* or *immerse*. And most scholars agree that this is the way the early church practiced baptism. As far as we can tell from the historical evidence, it is only much later that the practice of sprinkling or pouring emerged.

There are a few other pointers to immersion, in addition to the meaning of the word in the original Greek and the imagery of death and burial. In Acts 8:36 the Ethiopian eunuch comes to faith while riding with Philip in his chariot and says, "Look, here is water! Why shouldn't I be baptized?" Philip agrees and we read in verse 38 that "He gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him."

That they "went down into the water" makes the most sense if they were going down in order for Philip to immerse him, not to sprinkle him. Similarly it says in John 3:23 that "John . . . was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of

water.” You don’t need plenty of water if you are simply sprinkling. You just need a jar.

So there is really very little dispute that this was the way the early church baptized. They did it by immersing new believers in water to signify their burial and resurrection with Jesus.

This does not mean that the use of some other mode is necessarily sinful or wrong. After all, baptism outwardly declares our inward commitment to Jesus Christ. This public declaration holds true, no matter what mode is used. The important thing is that we be personally committed to Jesus Christ.

We nevertheless affirm that immersion most closely follows the biblical pattern of baptism, and therefore immersion is the mode of baptism practiced at Village Bible Church.

10. Baptism is in the Trinitarian Name.

Baptism means doing this immersing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That’s what Jesus said in Matthew 28:19: *“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.”* This means that not just any immersing is baptism. There is a holy appeal to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit to be present in this act and to make it true and real in what it says about their work in redemption. There is no salvation without the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When we call on their name, we depend upon them and honor them and say that this act is because of them and by them and for them.

11. Baptism is a blessing

While baptism does not accomplish our salvation, there is great blessing in the baptism experience. The following quote captures the beauty of this blessing:

In all the discussion over the mode of baptism and the disputes over its meaning, it is easy for Christians to lose sight of the significance and beauty of baptism and to disregard the tremendous blessing that accompanies this ceremony.

The amazing truths of passing through the waters of judgment safely, of dying and rising with Christ, and of having our sins washed away, are truths of momentous and eternal proportion and ought to be an occasion for giving great glory and praise to God.

When baptism is properly carried out then of course it brings spiritual benefit as well. There is the blessing of God’s favor that comes with all obedience, as well as the joy that comes through public profession of one’s faith, and the reassurance of having a clear physical picture of dying and rising with Christ and of washing away sins. Certainly the Lord gave us baptism to strengthen and encourage our faith — and it should do so for everyone who is baptized and for every believer who witnesses a baptism. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 969, 980-981)

12. Baptism therefore is important.

- a. It was uncompromisingly commanded by the Lord Jesus.
- b. It was universally administered to Christians entering the early church.
- c. It was uniquely connected to conversion as an unrepeatable expression of saving faith.

Brief Answers to Common Questions

1. When should baptism be performed?

As soon as possible after conversion. Remember, baptism is not a mark of spiritual maturity, but rather a statement of personal identification with Jesus Christ.

2. How old should children be before they are baptized?

They should be old enough to make an intelligent profession of faith in Christ. While there is no set age for this to take place, it seems appropriate that those being baptized should be able to clearly understand and affirm their commitment to Jesus Christ. (For further details, please refer to our *Distinctives* document entitled "Preparing Young People for Baptism.")

3. What do we do for our infants?

Several times a year we offer a meaningful time of child dedication. It takes place during a regular worship service and places the emphasis on the parents and their responsibility to raise their children for the Lord. (For a biblical explanation of why we do not baptize infants, see point #12 below.)

4. What about being baptized again?

We recommend that you be baptized if you were not baptized by immersion AFTER accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. However, you don't need to be baptized again if you were baptized after accepting Jesus Christ but have struggled and are now renewing your commitment. If you're seeking to rededicate your life to God, the best action is to get connected to a small group and focus on growing your relationship with God in community with other believers.

5. What actually happens at a baptismal service?

Baptisms normally take place during our Sunday morning worship services. We usually begin with a brief explanation about baptism, and then an elder and the person to be baptized stand in the water facing the congregation. The person to be baptized may give their testimony to the congregation if they wish. This can make the testimony to unbelievers in attendance even stronger. The one being baptized is then asked to affirm his or her faith in Jesus Christ by answering in the affirmative the following questions:

1. Are you a sinner deserving of God's eternal judgment?
2. Do you believe that Jesus is God's Son, sent to save sinners by His perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection?
3. Have you repented of your sins and placed your faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins and for the fulfillment of all His promises to you, even eternal life?
4. Do you now desire to place yourself under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and do you intend by faith to follow Jesus as Lord and obey his teachings?

6. Do I have to give a verbal testimony?

No, but we encourage it! While you must verbally affirm the questions listed above, it is not required that you give a verbal testimony of how you came to faith in Christ and how He changed your life. We encourage you, however, to share some of your testimony, as this can make the testimony to unbelievers in attendance even stronger – and can also serve as a significant encouragement to believers present. In either event, you will be required to prepare a written testimony and to bring it with you, since we want you to be prepared to share your testimony, should God give you the strength to do so!

7. Should I invite my friends and family to my baptism?

Absolutely. Nothing could be more appropriate. Remember that baptism is a public testimony to your faith in Christ. It is also a visual re-enactment of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. So, yes, by all means invite everyone you know to attend your baptism. Make it a festive, joyous occasion, and pray that God will use your witness to influence your friends for Christ.

8. Who will baptize me?

Inasmuch as baptism is intended to take place within the context of the church, it seems consistent with New Testament practice that elders should ordinarily be the ones to lead the congregation in the celebration of this ordinance. Is it possible for anyone other than an elder to perform a baptism? The answer is that yes, in certain instances, a godly, Bible-believing person can perform baptism. Our general policy, however, is for baptism to be the work of the elders.

9. What is the procedure for baptism?

The first step is to attend a baptism class. We want you to be baptized as soon as possible so we normally offer a baptism class each month and are willing to meet with you one-on-one as well to expedite the process. For individuals under the age of 18, we have a process that involves the parent(s) or a mentor as well. (Please see our VBC Distinctive: Preparing Young People for Baptism.)

Please call the church office to verify the time of the next class and to sign up.

Brief Answers to Theological Questions

1. **Doesn't Mark 16:16 say that baptism is required for salvation?**

No. Mark 16:16 says, *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* At first glance, this verse seems to be saying that there are two conditions for salvation – that to be saved, one must not only believe, but also be baptized. However, if we look more closely at the verse, it becomes clear that faith, or belief, is, in fact, the only condition for salvation – inasmuch as the second clause specifies only the absence of belief as the basis on which a person will be condemned.

2. **Isn't it our faith that justifies us?**

Doesn't the heart-felt repentance and commitment we make to the Lord in prayer get the job done? Isn't baptism supposed to be merely an outward expression of an inward and preexistent reality?

Those who feel this way often point to passages in the Bible that support what may be called a direct and immediate view of salvation, that is, a view which implies that justification can be had independent of any outward ritual. As the Apostle Paul declares, "with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." (Romans 10:10) And as the Apostle Peter proclaims, we are now living in an age in which, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!" (Acts 2:21)

While the Bible does indeed affirm that salvation comes through faith and repentance, it also affirms that baptism is the normal and God-ordained arena in which these sentiments find their appropriate expression. In the book of Acts whenever a man comes to faith in the Lord he is baptized immediately. One might say that his conversion and his baptism are thus so closely linked that they form a single, indistinguishable event. Therefore, while faith and repentance can be expressed simply through prayer, in the New Testament at least, they are always expressed through baptism as an acted prayer.

This understanding can be supported with verses of its own. For while Peter does declare that all who call on the Lord shall be saved, in that very same sermon, when specifically asked how one obtains this salvation, Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (Acts 2:38) And later this same man tells us that "baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience." (1

Peter 3:21) Paul too seems to have a somewhat nuanced view of baptism when he writes, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that we too may live a new life." (Romans 6:4) In all this we see that while the Apostles understood that salvation was something communicated to the individual through faith and repentance, those feelings were at least normally expressed to others (God included) through the act of baptism. That is to say, baptism served as the vehicle of repentance.

3. Isn't baptism a sign of God's covenant with us? Shouldn't we baptize infants in the same way boys were circumcised in the Old Testament?

In [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.

So Paul speaks of circumcision in "done-without-hands" terms. Circumcision today has meaning for the Christian, not as a physical act, but as a spiritual act of Christ in which He cuts away the old sinful body and makes us new. It is virtually synonymous with the new birth. Then Paul speaks of baptism, 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 2:11-12

So the image of spiritual circumcision is closely connected to the image of baptism: "You were circumcised . . . having been baptized . . ." The old sinful nature was cut away in conversion; you died and rose again in baptism.

We believe, therefore, to say that baptism has replaced circumcision as the mark of being part of the people of God. In the Old Testament men were circumcised to signify membership in the old-covenant people of God; in the New Testament men and women are baptized to signify membership in the new-covenant people of God.

This has led many Christians to assume that just as the male children of the people of the old covenant were circumcised, the male and female children of the people of the new covenant should be baptized.

But textually and covenantally, it doesn't work. Colossians 2:12 says, ". . . *having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith . . .*" The words "through your faith" are all important on this issue. Paul says that when you come up out of the water, signifying being raised with Christ, this is happening through faith.

Baptism, as a drama of death and resurrection with Christ, gets its meaning from the faith that it expresses. In baptism you are "raised with him through your faith."

Through Faith! Paul reflects the same way of thinking about baptism and faith in Galatians 3:26-27: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." We become children of God through faith and by no other means. Then Paul says "for"—

connecting this way of becoming children of God with baptism: “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

This explanation, with the word “for,” makes sense only if baptism is understood as an acting out of faith. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Or to turn it around: Since you were baptized into Christ, we know that in Christ you are all children of God through faith. Why? Because that is what baptism means: You were baptized into Christ by faith. Baptism without faith was inconceivable to Paul.

New-Covenant Membership by Spiritual Birth: When the shift happened in redemptive history from the old covenant to the new covenant and from circumcision to baptism, there was a shift from an ethnic focus on Israel and from only males being given the sign of membership in the people, to a spiritual focus on the church of all nations, with both males and females being given the sign of membership in God’s people, namely, baptism.

Membership in the new-covenant people of God is not by physical birth, but by spiritual birth. That new birth happens by the Word of God, the Gospel (1 Peter 1:23-25). Therefore, the church should be composed not of believers and their infants, but of believers only. And the sign of membership in the new-covenant people is a sign not for infants but for believers.

Some sections excerpted and adapted from teachings on baptism by John Piper.

Preparing a Personal Testimony

It is very important for any Christian interested in effectively sharing Jesus Christ to have an effective, concise testimony. A testimony is simply sharing what Christ has done in our lives. It is a very powerful tool if developed properly. Revelation 12:11 tells us, "And they overcome him (Satan) because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony." Jesus, when He healed the demonic of Gerasenes, told him this, "Return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). A positive, clearly presented, two-minute testimony can be very helpful in encouraging people to respond to Jesus Christ.

There are several things to do as you prepare your testimony:

1. Ask the Lord to give you wisdom and guidance before you begin.
2. Develop it around a three-point outline.
 - a. My life before knowing Christ
 - b. How I came to know Christ
 - c. My life after I received Christ (what He has helped you with, how he has affected your life, etc.)
3. Emphasize what has happened since you received Christ (Jesus told the demonic to "return...and describe what great things God has done for you.")
4. Make your first sentence interesting and attention-getting. Close with a good conclusion.
5. Write in such a way that a non-Christian can identify with you.
6. Be positive, not negative, from the start to the finish. Don't present Christianity as problem-free; be realistic. Share exactly what Christ has helped you with and what He means to you now.
7. Be specific.
8. Use Scripture – be sure to explain how you came to know God personally.

Avoid the following:

1. Clichés that are meaningless to the non-Christian, such as: "blessings," "born again," "Praise God," "conversion," "glorious."
2. Vague generalities about what has happened in your life. Be specific.
3. Being critical of any churches, denominations, or individuals.
4. Using too many of the same words, such as: fantastic, exciting, great, etc.
5. Preaching – just share your experience.

Testimony Work Sheet

My life before knowing Christ:

How I came to know Christ:

My life after I received Christ:

Also, try to include a scripture or two that are meaningful to you.

Procedure for the Day of Baptism

1. Bring appropriate clothing for wearing into the water.
2. Bring a towel and hair dryer.
3. Bring a plastic bag for your wet clothes.
4. Bring dry clothes to change back into (don't forget socks, etc.)
5. Bring your written testimony with you.
6. Once you have been baptized, exit the baptismal on the same side that you entered.