

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

INTRODUCTION

- Of all the symbols that Jesus could have instituted to encourage His disciples, He chose to leave us sacraments as an enduring means of encouraging and increasing our faith.
- It's clear that the sacraments were intended to signify Jesus' work on our behalf, and to seal upon us the reality of the salvation that we have received.
- In the following outline, we will attempt to answer some questions about the sacraments in a question-and-answer format.
- While these answers are not exhaustive, they're meant to help us to understand what the sacraments are and why Jesus gave them to his church.
- We want to benefit as fully as possible from all the means that God has ordained for us to be strengthened in the gospel.

I. COMMON QUESTIONS REGARDING THE SACRAMENTS

A. What is a sacrament?

- A sacrament is a visible sign and seal of an invisible grace. Sacraments make the gospel visible to us, and serve as a means for God to speak to His church, assuring us of the forgiveness of our sins and of our identity in Christ.
- The sacraments also serve as a sign to the watching world as we profess our faith in Jesus, and identify ourselves with Him. In this way the sacraments serve a dual purpose:

1. As a sign of God to man (of salvation)
2. As a sign of man to man (of union with Christ).

- "A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs of the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these, in turn, give expression to their faith and allegiance to God."

Louis Berkoff

- "An outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace."

Bruce Milne

B. How many sacraments are there?

- The Biblical witness recognizes two sacraments that were instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

1. Baptism

- "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, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19,20

2. The Lord's Supper

- "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" I Corinthians 11:23-25
- See also John 13

C. What Are the Elements of a Sacrament?

Three Parts:

1. A Visible (Sensory, Tactile) Element

- a. In baptism a believer sees and feels the water, as they enter into it, be submerged under it, and come out of it. In the Lord's Supper we see the elements, touch them, taste them – the experience is more than hearing about them or imagining them

2. A Definitive Activity Ordained by God

- a. The sacraments themselves were ordained by God and instituted through our Lord Jesus Christ. We need to appreciate the sacraments as both gifts and commands from Him.

- b. "God has established two ordinances in the new covenant – baptism and the Lord's Supper...Unfortunately, many professing Christians today think of them as merely nice suggestions that they can take or leave. On the contrary, they have been designed to be essential elements of the corporate worship of the church in which all members must participate." Wayne Mack and David Swavely

3. A Gracious Benefit Given to the Believer

- a. Jesus gave the sacraments to His church to strengthen our faith. As we participate, we are reminded of His saving work on our behalf, and that He is present with us to strengthen and sustain us.
- b. The benefit is not given because of mere outward participation in the sacrament but by faith in what the sacrament symbolizes. A sacrament is never meaningful apart from our understanding of it in faith. Simply participating in a ceremony achieves nothing if it is not united by active faith.
- c. Sacraments are often referred to as a means of grace. This does not mean that we earn grace through them as a means to salvation, but that God has ordained them as ways to remind us of our union with Him and to build faith in our lives as we regularly remind ourselves of this sacred union.

II. TWO COMMON ERRORS REGARDING THE SACRAMENTS

A. To Regard the Sacraments as Necessary for Salvation

- a. The sacraments have no saving function. They are commanded by God so we must participate, and in fact we have the privilege to do so, but they are not necessary for our salvation.
- b. Salvation depends on faith in Christ alone, not on faith plus works. If the sacraments were necessary for salvation because they were necessary for receiving saving grace, then salvation would really be based on faith plus works.

- c. In contrast to this, the clear teaching of the New Testament is justification by faith alone:
- "By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast."
Ephesians 2:8-9
 - "...the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
Romans 6:23
- d. "Salvation is not through the sacraments. Salvation is by faith in Christ. Yet where faith is present the sacraments are not ignored or neglected. They are a vital part of the worship of God and the nurture of the Christian life."
R.C. Sproul

B. To Regard the Sacraments as Unnecessary

1. The sacraments are necessary because they are commands of Christ.
2. The sacraments are necessary because they provide an important means of grace in the Christian life.
3. The baptism of a believer is accomplished one time; however the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a regular, ongoing practice enabling the worship of God and encouragement for our Christian walk.
 - "The sacraments are not absolutely necessary unto salvation, but are obligatory in view of the divine precept. Willful neglect of their use results in spiritual impoverishment and has a destructive tendency, just as a willful and persistent disobedience to God has." Louis Berkhoff

III. COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM

A. What is baptism?

- Baptism is the initial sign and seal of our trusting in Jesus Christ. It signals the inward cleansing of our souls (Acts 22:16, I Cor.

6:11) by faith in Christ alone, and the Spirit-born regeneration of our souls (Titus 3:5)

B. What does baptism symbolize?

- Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ, as we identify with him in his death (as we go under the water), and in his resurrection (as we are raised out of the water).
 - “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, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life.” Romans 6:3-4
 - “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, 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
- Baptism symbolizes our being raised to the newness of life in Christ, as we now declare to a watching world that we desire to live all of life under the Lordship of Christ.

C. What is the mode of baptism?

- As referred to above, the practice of baptism in the New Testament is carried out through immersion in water. Baptism by immersion is therefore the pattern we seek to follow.
1. The Greek word “baptizo” means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. According to scholars, this is the recognized and standard meaning of the term not just in the Scriptures but also in ancient Greek literature
 2. Biblical Texts:
 - a. Mark 1:5 – people were baptized “in”, not beside or by or near, the Jordan River
 - b. Mark 1:10 – Mark tells us that when Jesus was baptized, “he came up out of the water”

- c. John 3:23 – John the Baptist “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there.” It would not take “much water” to baptize people by sprinkling, but it would take much water to baptize by immersion
 - d. Acts 8:36-39 – Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch
3. All baptisms at Grace Community Church will be by immersion, though those baptized otherwise at other churches are considered valid provided that the baptism was based upon an active profession of faith.

D. Is there any Old Testament predecessor to baptism?

- In the Old Testament, circumcision functioned as the initial marker of membership in God’s covenant people. There are significant overlaps in symbolism and meaning between the two, while there are also significant differences.
- The circumcision of the OT was done by human hands, in obedience to God, while faith in Christ is a circumcision of the heart, not accomplished by human hands but by Christ himself. Baptism is therefore the visual representation of the circumcision of the heart. (Col. 2:11-12)
- Males only received circumcision whereas any person can be baptized

E. Who may be baptized?

- All who are trusting in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of their sins and are able to give a credible profession of faith are to be baptized.
- An infant is not yet capable of making a professing faith in Christ, therefore at GCC we do not baptize infants

F. Why should a person be baptized?

- Jesus commands those who are his followers to be baptized
 - Matthew 28:20
- To identify with Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection
 - Romans 6:3-4

- To testify that they are disciples of Christ
 - Colossians 2:12

F. How does baptism encourage our faith?

- The New Testament makes more of our baptism than we may realize. Paul appeals to our baptism to serve as a reminder and encouragement to us. When he says "You were baptized" he intends it to remind the believers as such: "God has set his love upon you. He has regenerated you by his Spirit. He has caused faith to rise in your heart, and you have trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."
- Baptism, then, serves as a shorthand means for remembering our very salvation and cleansing through faith in Christ.
- 1 Peter 3:18-22; Galatians 3:25-29; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Titus 3:4-8

IV. COMMON QUESTIONS REGARDING WHEN TO BAPTIZE

A. When should a child be baptized?

- When he or she can provide a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Gal. 3:27).

B. What is a believable profession of faith?

- Anyone professing Jesus Christ as Lord should be able to:
 - Communicate the content of the gospel as an expression of faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.
 - Evidence appropriate sorrow over sin, followed by repentance which leads to the fruit of the Spirit.
 - Have the ability to examine himself and the condition of his soul (1 Cor.11:27-32).
 - Have demonstrated a willingness to turn away from sin and instead live a life keeping God's commands and loving Christ and His Church (1 John 2:15-17; 5:1-5).

- Exhibit in his life fruit which proceeds from regeneration (Gal. 5:22-23).

C. Does God save young children?

- Absolutely, yes! God can and does convert young children (Romans 10:9-13, Act 2:21).
- At the same time, we recognize that given the nature of children, with varying intellectual maturity and with the potential to be easily influenced and change opinions, it can be difficult to discern with certainty whether a child is truly converted. The younger a child is, the more challenging this becomes.

D. At what age should children be baptized? Is there a minimum?

- The Bible prescribes no minimum age for baptism, it is silent on this subject.
- Because it is difficult to discern when a child's profession of faith is truly believable, it is generally wise to discern evident fruit of real faith before proceeding to baptism.

E. What is the role of the parent in evaluating a child's readiness to be baptized?

- Scripture calls parents to bear primary responsibility for the condition of their children's souls. They are to:
 - Teach their children God's commands (Deut. 6:7)
 - Train their children up in the way they should go (Pro. 22:6)
 - Bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4)
- At the same time, pastors bear primary responsibility for administering the sacraments within the local church and for caring for the souls of those who receive them.
- For these reasons, parents should evaluate the readiness of their children for baptism and involve their pastors in this process.

- Parents know their children best and are ideally situated to discern the fruit of repentance in their children. (Note: the observations of others will also be extremely helpful in this process.)
- A parent who believes his child is ready to be baptized then meets with a pastor in the evaluating process. Parent, child and pastor should all be confident in the readiness of the child to move forward with baptism.

V. OTHER THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. The necessity of the Word of God to explain the sacraments:

- While He could have chosen some other means to remind us of our union with Him, Jesus chose to leave us the two sacraments to encourage and increase our faith.
- The sacraments were intended to signify Jesus' work on our behalf, and to seal upon us the reality of the salvation that we have received.
- We do not diminish the importance of the sacraments, but we also do not overestimate their effect. The sacraments do not save and are not necessary for salvation.
- Because they are visual symbols of the gospel, the sacraments require explanation. The sacraments only make sense within a gospel context, and are best practiced alongside the faithful preaching of God's Word.

B. The sacraments are a means of grace:

- Since we agree that they are not a necessity for salvation, they can be treated as optional extras.
- Yet because of our dynamic faith in Christ, and out of obedience to His commands in Scripture, we actively participate in these symbols as they are a vital part of ongoing worship and nurture in our Christian lives.

IV. **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

- J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter Varsity Press
- Donald Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I'm A Christian?*, Nav Press
- Dennis Gunderson, *Your Child's Profession of Faith*, Calvary Press
- Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans Publishing Co
- David F. Wright, *Baptism: Three Views*, Inter Varsity Press