

What, When and Why

When someone decides to “get right with God,” part of the “outward sign” of accepting Jesus as their savior is being baptized. It is an exciting time, but there are many questions regarding baptism that should be clarified, since so many conflicting ideas regarding this topic developed over the centuries. The questions often come from four basic areas:

Can you go to heaven by being baptized?

What is baptism?

When should someone be baptized?

Why should someone be baptized?

Let's take a look at each of these questions.

Can you go to heaven by being baptized?

People are saved (and get to go to heaven) by believing that Jesus is the Christ and putting their faith in Him. Baptism alone does not save. However, salvation (being saved) and baptism are always tied together, as we explain on our “Getting Right With God” page.

What is baptism?

The process of baptism is very simple. You begin by standing, sitting, or kneeling in some water. Another Christian then lowers you under the water and then brings you back up out of the water. You could also literally call this “immersion.”

Because some faiths sprinkle water on people instead of immersing them, the obvious question is whether this is OK. Since the only consistent answer around the world comes from the Bible, we recommend using it to find your answers. It is interesting that nowhere in the Bible does anything but “immersion” take place. That is, baptism is always by immersion.

This makes sense if you realize that “baptize” is a transliteration of the original Greek word baptizw (baptizo). In turn, baptizo comes from the root word baptw (bapto), a term used in the first century for immersing a garment first into bleach and then into dye, both cleansing and changing the color of the cloth.[1] (Note its similarity to baptism's cleansing of sin and becoming a new person through Christ.) Stated another way, when you process cloth to change its color, you are said to “baptize” it. If sprinkling of any kind was to be practiced, a different Greek word would have been used, but it was not.

When should someone be baptized?

Let's look at this question from two directions.

#1 - Does a person's age make a difference?

A natural question would be, “does your age make a difference?” More specifically, you may ask whether infants or young children should be baptized. It may help if you

understand where the idea and practice of baptizing infants came from. Around 400 AD, a man named Augustine came up with the idea of “original sin.” This basically said that everyone inherits the sin of Adam at birth and is therefore separated from God from the beginning of their life. Of course, this caused parents to become concerned over the fate of their children, should they die before “getting right with God.” Since only one of the four steps required to get right with God could be done by (or to) an infant, they decided to baptize them to “take care of the original sin.” Since it is risky to immerse an infant, these people decided to sprinkle them with water instead. Thus, both baptizing infants and baptizing by sprinkling came from human ideas. They did not come from the Bible.

If we look in the Bible we see that children are never seen to “accept Christ” (and therefore get right with God). It is also interesting that God never tells us what to do to keep a child safe. Did He just forget this important point, letting many children go to Hell and suffer eternally? No. A child is safe in the arms of God until they can understand how to be saved by accepting Jesus as their savior. (See 2 Samuel chapter 12, verses 22 and 23 along with Matthew chapter 18, verse 10.) Thus, only adults and older children (who can understand separation from God because of sin and so forth) are at the age when acceptance of Christ is possible.

#2 - When in the process of accepting Christ does baptism come in?

A second question would be, “When should I get baptized: immediately, as a part of accepting Christ; or later as a follower of Christ?”

If you've been around churches at all, you will run into the following philosophies:

“Baptism is just an outward sign of an inward grace, so it can be done later.”

“You need to ‘grow in Christ’ (become good enough) before you are ready to be baptized.”

“To join our church, you have to be baptized into our church.”

The problem with these ideas (and any similar ones) is that they are in conflict with the Bible. One thing is clear, the Bible always places believing in Christ for salvation and baptism together. They are not separated. Consider these references:

Acts chapter 2, verse 41 (Acts 2:41) - 3,000 people were baptized after believing on the first day of the Christian church. Verses 38 and 39 make it clear that this is the way that it will always be done. That is, all people who accept Christ as their savior will come to Him in this way.

Acts 8:26-39 - We know where this road from Jerusalem to Gaza is. Verse 26 terms it a “desert.” The only water there was oasis water. This means that the eunuch and Philip climbed down into the people's drinking water to do this. Apparently, Philip and the eunuch did not think it could wait until later! (You will also notice they did not take a handful of water and “sprinkle” the eunuch to keep things sanitary, either.) The Bible states that all Philip did was “preach Jesus to him” (verse 35) and then the eunuch said that he wanted to be baptized (verse 36). This means that the preaching of Jesus

includes preaching the need to be baptized.

Acts 9:18 - after this encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, Saul (later renamed Paul) decided to accept Jesus—and was baptized.

Acts 10:47,48 - Cornelius and those with him were commanded to be baptized, becoming the first non-Jewish converts to Christianity.

Acts 16:13-15 - Lydia and her household “believed” and were baptized.

Acts 16:16-34 - The Philippian jailer “believed” with his household and they were baptized—and this was in the middle of the night!

On top of all these references, when Jesus left the earth (see the end of the book of Matthew) He told his followers to make disciples (followers), baptize them, and teach them. Jesus apparently felt it was pretty important to make this a priority for His followers.

The Bible is clear—belief and baptism were always together. Thus, “when we believe” is the right time to be baptized. If you “believed” some time back and were not baptized, then this should become a priority for you to fulfill what God asks you do in the Bible.

Why should someone be baptized?

The Bible gives a number of reasons to be baptized:

Acts 2:38 - Tying repentance and baptism together provides forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 6:1-7 - This shows us that the mode of baptism (immersion) pictures the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In the same way that He went through these things, our old nature is to “die” and we are to be “buried with Him through baptism into death” and raised to “walk in newness of life” (live like Jesus). So we do not just try to be a better person, we bury the “old person” in the water and become a “new person” through our acceptance of Christ. It is like a new birth and a new beginning for us.

Galatians 3:27 - We “put on Christ” when we are baptized.

1 Peter 3:21 - Baptism is not an outward cleaning, but saves us through an inward cleaning. It is an appeal to God for a good conscience and asks God to take away the guilt of our past sin (that Christ paid for, wiping our “inner slate” clean).

Well, now you have it—the what, when and why. The only question left to ask is, “what will I do now?” That is between you and God.