

BAPTISM

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Baptism is an essential “first step” for a believer who seeks to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple of Christ is one who is serious about learning about Christ and applying this truth to their life. In taking it, believers reveal that a coup has taken place in the secret recesses of their soul. The government of self has been toppled and overthrown. In its place, a new authority must reign and rule. It is Christ, the living Lord! We uphold the act of baptism as a sacred, uncompromisable injunction of the Scripture. Every believer, serious in his or her faith, will also be serious about “baptism.” It is the “badge” of our identity with Christ.

FROM THE GRACE CHURCH DOCTRINE OF ORDIANCE

HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL:

This booklet is designed to give an overview of the theological convictions of Grace Church on the topic of baptism. For those who wish to be baptized at Grace Church, you are asked to read through this material, and meet with a pastor or elder to make sure everyone is on the same page in regards to its material and why you are seeking baptism.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism and communion (the Lord's Supper) are the two ordinances¹ prescribed by our Lord Jesus Christ as visible symbols of invisible grace. They are discernible and tangible representations of both the invisible realities of the gospel² and the Spirit's application of this gospel to our lives.

With both ordinances, believers have an opportunity to "remember" God's goodness and grace, especially as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Both baptism and communion picture Christ's death and resurrection and our participation in His death and resurrection through union to Him in faith. As we enter into the waters or watch another do so, we are reminded that Christ was crucified and raised from the dead and that we too have died to the old self in order to live for Christ.

What a person believes about baptism affects how they will perform the ordinance. Who should be baptized? When should they be baptized? How should they be baptized? All of these questions are answered as we reflect upon what baptism means.

The Grace Church Statement of Faith describes baptism as *an "ordinance" meaning it is a symbolic act of faith and obedience*. This act demonstrates a person's union with Christ in the likeness of His death and resurrection. It signifies that a person's former way of life has been put to death and depicts a release from the mastery of sin.

As a symbol, baptism illustrates a number of significant realities:

1. Christ's death and resurrection
2. The disciple's union with Christ in His death and resurrection
3. The new life in which a disciple walks
4. Cleansing and washing away of sin

IS BAPTISM MERELY A SYMBOL?

Within the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries, the nature of the sacraments was fiercely debated, even between the various Reformers. Without attempting to justify any particular position, it is important to assert that baptism is in some mysterious sense a "means of grace," in which God sanctifies and encourages His people. That said, it is important to bear in mind a few helpful truths regarding what baptism is not and does not do:

¹ Protestant theology has often chosen the term "ordinance" rather than "sacrament" in order to distance itself from the accompanying nuances of the Roman Catholic usage of that term. That said, if understood properly, either term is acceptable.

² Though there are various ways to describe the "good news," it centers on the provision of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as a substitute for our sins. He lived a perfect life, was crucified, and was raised three days later. Through faith in Him, we are united to Him and thus reconciled to God.

1. **BAPTISM DOES NOT SAVE.** Though grace is mysteriously mediated through the ordinance, it is not saving grace, but rather sanctifying grace. We are more conformed to the image of Christ as we obey Him in the call to be baptized.³
2. **BAPTISM IS NOT NECESSARY FOR SALVATION.** Without in any way diminishing the duty and delight of baptism for a believer, we must also warn against thinking which suggests that salvation is dependent upon baptism. The gospel is one of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone.⁴

WHY SHOULD ONE BE BAPTIZED?

MATTHEW 28:18–20 *And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

ACTS 2:37–41 *Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” 41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

ACTS 22:16 *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.*

1. To obey the commands of Christ
2. To evidence that a person is a disciple of Christ
3. To follow the example of Christ

³ While 1 Peter 3 states, “baptism...saves you,” it is important to note the context and particularly Peter’s immediate clarification that it is not the water but the “appeal to God” which saves. This corresponds to passages such as Romans 10:13, which states that, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” We appeal to God and call upon Him as an expression of faith. Baptism is a symbol of this faith, which alone saves.

⁴ John 3 states that unless a person is “born of water and the Spirit” he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Many point to this as evidence of the necessity of baptism. However, nothing in the context suggests that Jesus is speaking of baptism. Rather, He is alluding to the promise of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36, which speaks of both “water” and “Spirit.” Therefore, Jesus is saying that “new birth” or “regeneration” is necessary for salvation, not baptism.

Baptism is not merely a responsibility, but also a privilege. We have the opportunity to evidence our trust in, and love for, our King through obedience in this ordinance. If we think of baptism as a mere burden, we have not properly understood the joy of following Christ in the call to be baptized. We should have a similar response as the Ethiopian eunuch who, when he believed the gospel, proclaimed, “What prevents me from being baptized?” It should be our joy, and we should eagerly anticipate our participation in the ordinance.

While there are certain costs associated with baptism,⁵ the reward of obedience is always worth it.

The desire to be baptized should be motivated by a desire to glorify God in faithful obedience. Any other motivation (to join a particular local church, to please a friend or family member, etc.) should not be the ultimate reason for seeking to be baptized.

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

MATTHEW 28:18–20 *And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

The Grace Church Statement of Faith begins by stating that ***“baptism is an essential ‘first step’ for a believer who seeks to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.”***

We practice what is called “believer’s” or “confessor’s” baptism, which means we only baptize those who believe and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Reading through Acts, we find baptism explicitly related to repentance, receiving the Word, believing and receiving the Holy Spirit. There is no explicit evidence to suggest that nonbelievers were baptized.

ACTS 2:41 *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

ACTS 8:12 *But 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.*

GALATIANS 3:27 *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*

⁵ In certain cultures, those who are baptized open themselves up to public persecution. Even in our context, participants often face the ridicule of family and friends.

ROMANS 6:3–4 *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 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.*

SHOULD A PERSON BE REBAPTIZED?

There should always be seasons of growth and greater periods of maturity in the life of those who have trusted in the gospel. Believers should not be re-baptized each time they experience greater joy and sanctification. However, if you believe that your original experience was prior to truly trusting in Christ as Lord and Savior, you should pursue obedience in this area by being baptized now.

WHEN SHOULD A PERSON BE BAPTIZED?

ACTS 22:16 *And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.*

As soon as a person trusts Christ, he or she should be baptized. The Scriptures do not speak of a delayed baptism in which a regenerate believer refrains from obedience to the ordinance. In all the accounts in the Scriptures, baptism is rather immediate. This pattern of somewhat immediate baptism should be emulated unless there are convincing reasons to delay baptism.

IMPROPER MOTIVATIONS FOR DELAYED BAPTISM:

1. FEAR

One of the most common reasons for delaying is fear, but such anxiety should not hinder our obedience. It is important to know that fear is sin and thus should not be passively accepted. Confronting sin is an essential aspect of discipleship, and a person's obedience in this area is an excellent way to begin the process of sanctification in the area of the fear of man.⁷

⁷An excellent resource on this topic is "When People are Big and God is Small" by Ed Welch.

2. NOT BEING GOOD ENOUGH

There will never be a time where a person will be “good enough” for baptism. Our right to enter the baptismal waters is grounded upon Christ’s righteousness, not our own. If we have been united to Him, we should confidently draw near in obedience to His command and example.

THE PRACTICE OF GRACE CHURCH

At Grace Church, we ask believers who wish to be baptized to temporarily delay for a brief season while they review this baptism material, meet with a pastor/elder, and await the next baptism date on the church’s calendar.⁸ First, this practice allows us to discuss the gospel and the meaning of baptism and to teach our theological convictions regarding both. Second, it allows the church the opportunity to celebrate together as a congregation sharing in the joy of a person’s obedience and agreeing to walk with him or her in fellowship. Finally, it allows the person being baptized to invite family and friends who will have an opportunity to celebrate and hear the proclamation of the gospel.

HOW SHOULD A PERSON BE BAPTIZED?

Though other denominations and theological traditions baptize by pouring or sprinkling, Grace Church practices baptism by immersion.⁹ We do so in light of the following considerations:

1. The Greek word βαπτίζω (baptizo) literally means to plunge, submerge or immerse.

Our English word baptism is a transliteration of the Greek baptizo. Baptizo was used in Greek literature to describe the act of immersing something in water or another liquid. It later became a technical term that referred specifically to the Christian ordinance of baptism.

2. The representation of union in Christ’s death and resurrection is best expressed through immersion.

Whether buried below or above ground, the symbolism of burial is still that of being placed under something. Likewise, resurrection is accomplished by coming out of something (whether grave or tomb). Immersion best symbolizes this reality by actually placing the believer under the water and bringing them out.

In addition, it is interesting to note the use of water to symbolize judgment in the Scriptures (e.g. the flood of Genesis 6-7 and the destruction of Egypt in the Red Sea of Exodus 14). Thus, by passing through the waters of baptism, the believer expresses trust that God’s judgment has been satisfied by Christ.

⁸ Celebration services are regularly scheduled services in which we baptize and receive the Lord’s Supper.

⁹ Except in those rare cases in which immersion is impossible or impractical. By way of examples, baptism by sprinkling is certainly to be practiced in the case of a person who is physically unable to be immersed.

COLOSSIANS 2:12 *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.*

ROMANS 6:3–4 *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ 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.*

3. The surrounding context of baptisms in the Scriptures suggests baptism by immersion.

MATTHEW 3:16 *And when Jesus was baptized, immediately **he went up from the water**, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him...*

MARK 1:5, 10 *And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins...And when **he came up out of the water**, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.¹⁰*

JOHN 3:23 *John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, **because water was plentiful there**, and people were coming and being baptized...*

ACTS 8:38–39 *And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both **went down into the water**, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹And when they **came up out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.¹¹*

WHERE SHOULD A PERSON BE BAPTIZED?

Although there are no prescriptions in the Scriptures about location, we prefer to practice the ordinance within the context of the local church in order to allow the congregation to celebrate together in a person's act of obedience and submission.

That said, we do not want to prescribe what the Scriptures do not, and thus we do allow for baptism to occur outside the weekly gathering. Our preference in such cases is that video and/or pictures be taken to record the event so that the church can share in the joy.

¹⁰ The prepositions here are crucial. Verse 5 has the Greek *en*, not another preposition meaning beside or near. Verse 10 has *ek* not *apo* which would have been used for merely going away from the water.

¹¹ It is important to note that this verse speaks of both Philip and the eunuch going down into and coming up out of the water, but the significance is found in the fact that they actually entered into the water which would have been unnecessary if baptizing by sprinkling or pouring. Surely the caravan would have had sufficient water for those modes had they been a preferable practice.

WHO CAN PERFORM BAPTISM?

The Bible gives no prescription for the requirements to perform baptism. Contrary to some traditions, there seems to be no biblical reason to restrict the duty to men who have been ordained to vocational ministry. Therefore, we allow any believer, male or female, who has faithfully obeyed the ordinance of baptism to perform the ordinance of baptism.

APPENDIX A: HOW WE BAPTIZE AT GRACE CHURCH

PRIOR TO THE BAPTISM:

1. We ask those wishing to be baptized to read through this baptism booklet and be able to articulate their understanding of its position.
2. After reading through this material, we ask for participants to speak to a pastor or elder about (a) their understanding of baptism as well as (b) telling their story of conversion. This allows us to look particularly for evidences of grace and a proper understanding of the gospel. (For instance, we want to make sure a person does not articulate that he or she was born a Christian or thinks that Christianity consists merely in moral improvement.)

BAPTISM SERVICES:

1. We have regular celebration services in which the church celebrates baptisms together. We encourage those wishing to be baptized to do so within the context of these gatherings.¹²
2. Participants are asked to personally share their testimonies if possible (a 1 minute version) or to have the person baptizing them to share for them.
3. After the testimony, the person performing the baptism will ask, “Do you confess and believe Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” to which the baptizee will respond, “Yes” or “I do.”
4. The baptizer will then immerse and subsequently raise the baptizee out of the water while saying, “I baptize you, my (brother or sister) in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ [Some will choose to also say, “Buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life” which is taken from Romans 6:4 *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.*]

¹² We should remember from the “Where Should a Person be Baptized?” section that this is a preference, not a prescription.

¹⁴ Following the formula of Matthew 28:19, we baptize using the Trinitarian confession. In Acts, the apostles typically baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ,” but this should not be viewed as differing in meaning from Matthew’s prescription. The context of Acts is concerned with testifying to the resurrection of Christ, and thus He is distinguished among the persons of the Trinity, but all that is true of the character (“name” often represents character in the Scriptures) of Christ is true of the Father and Spirit, as well.

HELPFUL HINTS:

1. Wear dark shorts and a dark shirt to maintain modesty.
2. Bring a change of clothes, towel and bag to hold your wet clothes after you change. Leave them in the downstairs bathrooms underneath the stairwell before the Sunday service begins.
3. Leave the service after the last set of worship songs (after the sermon and communion) in order to prepare to be baptized.

BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP

Baptism is a requirement for membership at Grace Church. We require anyone wishing to join the church to have displayed obedience to Christ's command. While we practice a baptism by immersion at Grace, we do not require the mode of immersion for membership. If a person was sprinkled or immersed (or a possible other mode), he or she has met our requirement for membership.