

What is Baptism?

As sinners we desperately need to be cleansed. Salvation is a total immersion of the whole person into the very grace and forgiveness of God. It is hard to describe the mystery of being forgiven. It's like love, you can't see it – but no one can doubt that it's real. When a person has been forgiven because of faith in the passion of Christ, it's real.

The ancient rite of baptism has been with the church now for almost 2,000 years. The word "baptism" comes from the Greek word *baptizo* and means "to dip, or immerse in water." It is the visible sign or symbol of God's real but invisible grace in a Christian's life. When a person is baptized he or she is saying, "I believe Christ died in my place. I have been immersed in the love and grace of God. I have been completely forgiven."

Baptism in Church History

The very earliest believers practiced what we call today, "believer's baptism." Children were baptized but only when they were old enough to understand and believe the gospel. There were even debates in the early church over how old a child needed to be before receiving baptism. ¹

During the Middle Ages, the practice of "believer's baptism" was eventually replaced with an innovative practice known as "infant baptism." Christian parents presented their child to the minister and "their present or future faith [was] announced by their parents." Because the child was not old enough to believe, some understood this practice to be an act of "vicarious faith," meaning that the parents exercised faith in the child's stead. ²

Around the year 1500, during a period known as the Reformation, the church revisited a number of doctrines, including the doctrine of baptism. The result was what we might call a three-way divide over the *meaning* of baptism.

1. **The Roman Church**, arguing from tradition, opted to maintain the practice of infant baptism teaching that it "erases original sin."³
2. **Some Protestants**, like Lutherans and Presbyterians, opted to maintain the practice of infant baptism but attempted to redefine the meaning. They were uncomfortable with saying that baptism magically washed away sins, but felt that undoing 1,000 plus years of church tradition would have created too many problems.
3. **Other Protestants** argued for a return to "believer's baptism" as practiced by the early church in an effort to end the confusion and return to the scriptures.

While Catholic infant baptism and Protestant infant baptism remain a common practice in the church, most Protestants in the world today have returned to the church's ancient roots. *Baptism is received by believers as a beautiful, visible sign, of being immersed into God's invisible but real grace.*

Who Should Be Baptized?

All who have called upon the name of the Lord for the forgiveness of their sins should be baptized. While it is possible that a person may be "saved" or "forgiven" without being baptized (for example, the thief on the cross was probably not baptized), an

unwillingness to be baptized may indicate that the person does not want to “go public” with their faith. When a person refuses to “wear the sign of baptism,” it is possible that the faith is not genuine. Children should be encouraged to be baptized when they understand the gospel and wish to make their faith public. As Tertullian (160-220 AD) said, “Let them come [for baptism] when they are able to learn, when they can be instructed.”⁴ (We offer classes for children--"Basic Spiritual Training for Kids"--whose parents would like assistance in this process.)

Calvary Church also requires persons who were baptized “as infants” to be baptized “as believers.” This is not intended to disparage the other great traditions of the church. We view those who differ with us on this matter as our brothers and sisters in Christ. However, we view a recovery of the ancient practice of believer’s baptism as the most Biblical, and we humbly appeal to those who wish to become part of our community to respect our tradition as well. If you were baptized as an infant, perhaps this can be viewed as an opportunity to publicly renew your commitment to Christ before the community.

If You Want to Be Baptized

If you would like to be baptized at Calvary, the first step is signing up for our Pre-Membership Class and we will guide you through the process. We do not require children or students to attend a class if their parents are members though we do require the parents and the child to meet with one of our Elders. (You may arrange a meeting by emailing our church office.)

We invite you to *dive in* with us. Christ was baptized to show that he was preparing to humbly die for you and wash away your sins. After his resurrection he told his followers to “go and preach the good news and baptize those who believe.” We invite you to join the growing number of people at Calvary Church who have experienced total immersion into God’s love and have received the ancient sign of God’s grace.

Footnotes

1 See Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

2 *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984), s.v. “Baptism,” by G. W. Bromiley.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 114.

4 Kurt Alan, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?*, 106.

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