

Baptism

grace church position papers

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” — Matthew 28:19

The Grace Church Structural Doctrines reflect our church’s core beliefs about baptism:

“Baptism is a one-time act of obedience that testifies of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism is an outward symbol that signifies an inward spiritual identification with Jesus Christ in both his death and resurrection. Baptism is for those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. According to the New Testament, immersion is the ideal means of baptism.”

For hundreds of years, baptism has been a source of controversy within the church, and today the Christian church is divided in opinion and interpretation on the issue. Some consider baptism essential for salvation, while others see it as a symbolic representation of the completed internal work of salvation in the life of the believer; still many others hold a view between these two major opposing interpretations. With many people within our body who have come from various backgrounds, and as the issue of baptism remains for some an area of concern, we feel that there are major practical questions to be considered:

1. What is the meaning of baptism?
2. Who should be baptized?
3. What is the proper mode of baptism?

1. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF BAPTISM?

Is God’s divine work of salvation brought about by baptism, or is baptism the symbolic response of the believer to salvation that has already taken place? There are a variety of beliefs concerning baptism within orthodox Christianity, but the presence of these conflicting views should not preclude a search for Biblical truth. The following is a summary of prominent positions on baptism:

Baptism as means of saving grace

The classic Roman Catholic view is that baptism itself moves a person from spiritual death to spiritual life:

“By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as punishment for sin. In those who have been

reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam’s sin, nor personal sin nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God.” — Roman Catholic Catechism, 1263

Within this view, baptism is a sacrament (i.e., a sacred or holy tradition) that imparts a saving or sanctifying grace and is required for salvation, except in extraordinary circumstances. The standard practice of the Catholic Church is infant baptism and faith is not necessary for the baptism to be effective; rather, it is believed that the act of baptism itself conveys God’s grace.

Baptism as sign and seal of covenant

Many protestant denominations (including Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist and Reformed churches) practice infant baptism. The belief that a Christian infant should be baptized is primarily based on an understanding of baptism as a sign of covenant, similar to that of circumcision in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, circumcision signified entrance into the community of God’s people, and was administered to all Israelite boys when they were eight days old.

Seeing baptism as the New Testament parallel to Old Testament circumcision, those who hold this view believe that baptism should be performed on all infants in the church community, just as circumcision was for Old Testament saints.

The Presbyterian view differs from the Catholic in that it connects baptism with the concept of a covenant relationship between God and man (i.e., God’s promise to set apart a people for Himself). Baptism is a sacrament, meaning it is primarily a sign or seal of God’s gracious covenant relationship; it serves as a visible sign of God’s inward and invisible working in man through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, baptism itself does not have inherent value, but it is an outward sign of inner faith.

Similarly, the Reformed view sees baptism as an act of faith that brings the believer into the covenant, not unlike circumcision in the Old Testament. Reformed churches also baptize infants into the covenant relationship even though salvation may or may not follow. Their stance is that

all new believers are to be baptized along with all children of believing parents; all are to be brought into the covenant relationship. They believe Christ substituted baptism for circumcision; therefore baptism is the new sign of the new covenant between God and believers in Christ.

Baptism as essential to salvation

A variety of denominations see baptism as a sign of a person's faith that is necessary to obtain salvation. Churches of Christ hold that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Oneness Pentecostal churches also require baptism as part of the repentance of a new believer; because they are tied together in the Bible, baptism is viewed as essential.

Baptism as symbol of salvation

Lastly, the "baptistic" view holds that baptism, as an outward symbol of inward change, is administered to those who give a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is an ordinance (i.e., a rite or ceremony) commanded by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20. While the act of baptism itself does not produce any spiritual change, it is meant to display a believer's salvation and mark a mutual commitment between the church community and this new follower of Christ. In contrast to the views above, this position differs in that it is reserved only for those who have professed faith in Christ and have committed to walk in the community of faith.

2. WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. — Ephesians 2:8-9

Salvation is found through faith in Jesus Christ alone. We are saved by His grace alone and any other requirement for our salvation is a perversion of the Gospel message and must be rejected.

Baptism, therefore, is a ceremony reserved for those who have already become believers by consciously putting their trust in Christ. Without exception, the New Testament portrays those who are baptized as those who have personal faith in Christ.

Baptism is not a requirement of salvation, unlike repentance and conversion. It is an act of faith and a public testimony that a believer has identified with Christ in his death. It serves as a physical symbol of what has happened on a spiritual level in the believer. A careful reading of some seemingly problematic texts (e.g., Mark 16:16; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21) does not change the basic meaning of baptism.

There is a definitive pattern in the events of the early church that belief preceded baptism. As demonstrated in the book of Acts, those baptized in the early church were already believers—not infants, or those seeking to be saved. There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that infants were ever baptized, even in 'whole household' baptisms. It is clear in the New Testament that the Gospel is heard, believed, and accepted prior to any baptism (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:38; 9:18; 18:8). This excludes both infant baptism and baptism that precedes faith in Christ from being considered biblical forms of baptism. Because the New Testament meaning of baptism demonstrates that a person believe first and then be baptized, there is no tenable, rational explanation to reverse the order.

3. WHAT IS THE PROPER MODE OF BAPTISM?

Sprinkling, pouring, or immersion? While it is not possible to fully resolve the issue of the proper mode of baptism on the basis of the study of the Greek, the predominant meaning of **baptizo** is to dip or to plunge under water (i.e., immersion). A reading of the texts dictates that those being baptized did go down into the water and then come up out of it (Mark 1:9). The Apostle Paul alludes to the symbolic connection between the immersion method of baptism and the believer's death and burial to sin and subsequent resurrection to new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-5). So it does seem that immersion was the mode consistently used in the New Testament.

One might question whether the method of baptism by immersion found in the New Testament must be authoritative and prescriptive, or if believers are free to be baptized by whichever method they deem best. We believe that God honors our obedience to the principles and patterns clearly stated in Scripture, and that immersion—while it may not be the only valid form—appears to be the form of baptism most consistent with what is seen in Scripture.

SUMMARY

We believe that our interpretation of baptism is faithful to the clear teaching of Scripture, yet we have not made complete conformity to our position regarding baptism a requirement for membership, acknowledging that there are several different interpretations regarding baptism and different conclusions may be reached.

Baptism stands as our outward testimony to the grace God has bestowed upon us by uniting us with Christ in his death and resurrection and raising us to new life in Him. We believe that baptism is largely an issue of obedience to Christ that must be addressed on the heart level. We encourage each person to search the Scriptures and seek the wisdom of God concerning his or her own baptism.