

Why Seek Baptism in the Church?

Evangelicals need to affirm aggressively the necessary connection between faith in Christ and commitment to His church. One cannot exist without the other, as demonstrated in Acts, where no one was counted as a Christian until he or she was baptized and received into the community of God's people.

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I've seen football fans who've painted themselves purple to match the color of their team, shaved the name of their team into their haircuts, worn silly rubber mascot masks, tattooed the team logo onto their shoulders, and even shortened their honeymoons, all in the name of loyalty. However, if for no other reason than sheer longevity, none of these expressions of *fanatic* enthusiasm can compare with the support of Giles Pellerin for the University of Southern California Trojan football team.

Pellerin, eighty-seven years old at this writing, recently attended his seven hundred fiftieth consecutive USC football game. Still hospitalized on Saturday, he told the nurses he was going for a walk and instead went to the stadium.

Why make such sacrifices to identify with an athletic team? Pellerin's answer: "But that's just all part of being a fan."

Though few go to Pellerin's extremes, there are millions throughout the world whose actions prove that they agree that "part of being a fan" is to openly demonstrate your dedication. But if you ask many Christians to publicly identify themselves with the Son of God in an unusual way which He Himself specified, they will think it strange, cult like, or only for the Giles Pellerins of the religious world. Some feel self-conscious about such public displays of devotion.

That's the response of many to the idea of Christian baptism. Even some who truly love Christ consider baptism insignificant or something to think about "tomorrow." How important is it? Why should anyone seek baptism in a local church?

BAPTISM OPENLY IDENTIFIES YOU AS A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST

"THE Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John [the Baptist]," records the apostle John (4:1), although Jesus didn't do the actual baptizing (His disciples did). Thousands often flocked to Jesus – some to be healed, some to see a miracle, many just to gawk at this far-famed Galilean man. But others went further by committing themselves to be Christ's disciples and submitting to a baptism that publicly marked them as His.

The last words of Jesus before He ascended into Heaven, according to Matthew 28:19, were "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The timing of this command of

Christ is significant. He has now completed His work of living, dying, and rising from the dead in order to “purify for Himself His own special people” (Titus 2:14). Before He returns to heaven, He gives what has been called the “Great Commission” about making “disciples of all the nations.”

Notice that the first thing Jesus said about those who become His disciples is that He wants them to be baptized. Baptism is the Christ-ordained way of openly identifying yourself as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Experiencing baptism doesn’t make you right with God. The water of baptism does not wash away the guilt of your disobedience to the laws of God. Rather, it is the grace of God, through the work of Jesus Christ that brings you into God’s family and favor. That doesn’t mean, however, that baptism is unimportant. Although baptism is never *equated* with faith or salvation in the New Testament, it is closely *associated* with both.

For example, when Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, that day when the Holy Spirit first came upon all who were followers of Jesus, Acts 2:41 reports this response by some of Peter’s listeners: “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

When Saul of Tarsus, who later became known as the apostle Paul, became a believer in Jesus Christ, “he arose and was baptized” (Acts 9:18). Later when Paul was in the Grecian city of Philippi, a jailer implored him, “What must I do to be saved?” The answer was, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30-31). “And immediately” says verse 33, “he and all his family were baptized.”

Baptism was – and should be – the first public expression of faith by those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. “Baptism,” says England’s Erroll Hulse, “is a testimony to the world. Their gaze is not to be discouraged. Our Lord was baptized in public. The baptisms at Pentecost were not secret.... Baptism is a testimony to a new life.”

When Caffy took vows of marriage to me that cold Saturday night in January, she accepted a ring from me and changed her last name to mine. Because of her love, she was not ashamed to outwardly identify herself with me. Christians are part of the church, which is compared in Ephesians 5:31-32 to a bride for Christ. Those who confess their love for Christ may call themselves by His name – *Christian*. To receive baptism in His name is like receiving a wedding ring. It marks you as one who belongs to Christ.

If you love Christ and are part of His bride, why wouldn’t you identify yourself with Him in the way He asks? Why would you be ashamed or unwilling to express your love to Him before others in this way? If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ but have never been baptized in His name, now is the time to present yourself to your local church for baptism and show in this uniquely Christian way that you are His.

BAPTISM OPENLY OBEYS THE COMMAND OF CHRIST

Some may wonder, *Isn’t baptism just a formality started by men centuries ago? Why can’t we rethink it in light of our own culture?*

Baptism is no mere custom started by ancient church leaders, then passed down from generation to generation as an encrusted ecclesiastical tradition or meaningless religious ritual. Baptism is a practice ordained by Jesus Christ Himself.

Let's look again at Jesus' Great Commission to the church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). Both the original language of this verse and our modern translation agree – Jesus commanded baptism for those who become His disciples.

I find two things especially interesting about the context of this command. First, look at the words of Jesus in the preceding verse: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. *Go therefore* and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them..." (italics added). Jesus bases His bidding that we be baptized on His complete authority over all creation. He is not pleading as a religious recruiter anxiously hoping that some of us will be persuaded to join His cause. Christ does not stand here as a great teacher instructing us with mystical insight about something He calls baptism. He isn't acting as a spiritually wise man appealing to us with the advantages of baptism.

Jesus expressly connects His directive about baptism to His authority as God and Lord over all. Even if there were no other reasons, we should be baptized because the King of the universe, the One who made us and owns us and the One who will judge us, has commanded it.

Next, notice what is on the other end of Jesus' baptismal imperative: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This reminds us that the King's command remains in force to the end of the world. As long as people become disciples of Jesus, it is His will that the church baptize them. He did not make baptism optional for different cultures, times, personalities, or preferences.

So then, for a disciple of Christ to know His will about baptism and then willingly refuse it is to intentionally disobey Christ and sin against God.

BAPTISM OPENLY EXPRESSES YOUR FAITH IN MANY TRUTHS

Christian baptism is symbolic of many things. To submit to baptism says that you believe what baptism represents.

God Is Triune

Jesus instructed His disciples to be baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This is also more of the language of identification. Baptism "*in the name of* the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is another way of identifying yourself with each member of the Trinity. In other words, you are not being baptized in the name of Moses, or the name of the apostle Paul, or the name of your church or pastor, but rather in the name of the triune God. Thus you are declaring allegiance and devotion to the God of the Bible. You are saying, "I belong to Him."

By submitting to a baptism where "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is spoken over you, you are agreeing with the teaching that God is Triune. You are saying through your baptism that you believe there is only one God who is three persons. As the old English minister Matthew Henry, perhaps the best-known of all Bible commentators, put it, "We are baptized not into the *names*, but into the *name* of

the Father, Son, and Spirit, which plainly intimates that *these Three are One*, and *their name One*.”

By affirming this mysterious but historic and orthodox belief, you deny several heresies, including *tritheism*, that is that there are three different persons who *together* become God. You also renounce *pluralism*, the heresy that there are three gods. You further reject *Unitarianism*, a belief that affirms there is one God, but which denies the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, you spurn *modalism*, which teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were never God simultaneously. Even if you haven’t heard of these dangerous theological errors, when you are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” you align yourself with the truth of the Trinity of God.

Baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” confesses your belief that each member of the Trinity is involved in your salvation and that you are brought into a relationship with each. God the Father chose you before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-6). God the Son died a bloody, painful death to make you right with the Father (Romans 5:1, 9-10; Galatians 2:16). God the Holy Spirit opened your eyes, enabling you to see your need to be reconciled to God and to believe in the work of Jesus Christ (John 16:8; 1 Corinthians 2:12; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2). New Testament baptism affirms that God does His saving work as Father, Son, and Spirit.

An old hymn declares rightly, “Jesus Saves.” And some religious groups in America will emphatically tell you they baptize in the name of “Jesus only.” But Jesus does not save apart from the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism was designed by Jesus to acknowledge the role of each person in the triune Godhead in your salvation.

Your Sins Have Been Washed Away

Water baptism doesn’t wash away sins; rather, it symbolizes cleansing. The baptismal water which washes the body pictures the cleaning of the soul. The outward act of baptism portrays the inward purification that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. So those who believe their sins have been washed away by Christ should experience the ordinance of Christ that illustrates it.

In the course of his famous sermon to the thousands gathered in Jerusalem in Acts 2, Peter proclaimed, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38).

Some have taken the words “be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ *for* the remission of sins” to mean that the forgiveness (remission) of sins and reception of “the gift of the Holy Spirit” occur at the time of baptism. This is incorrect. When you see a poster that says: “WANTED: John Doe *for* Murder,” that doesn’t mean John Doe is wanted *for the purpose of* murdering someone, but he is wanted because he *already has* murdered someone. Likewise, the Bible teaches here that those who have repented of their sin and believed in Jesus Christ for the remission of sins should be baptized *because* their sins are now forgiven. It affirms that repenting believers are given the gift of the Holy Spirit when they repent and believe. Do you believe God has forgiven your sins? If so, have you been baptized?

Sometimes those who believe in baptismal regeneration (the view that a person is regenerated-born again-at the time of water baptism) also point to Acts 22:16. In this passage the apostle Paul is telling the story of his conversion from Judaism to faith in

Christ. After Jesus appeared to him in a blinding vision on the road to Damascus, Paul, then known as Saul of Tarsus, was unable to see for three days. A believer in Damascus was sent by the Lord to deliver a message to Saul. The conclusion of that message was this: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”

Did Saul wash away his sins by receiving baptism? No, the grammar of the original language of this verse makes clear that it is the work of the Lord (not our work) that washes away sins. And it’s the “calling on the name of the Lord,” not baptism, that is instrumental in forgiveness. A person may be baptized every day, but unless he genuinely calls on the name of the Lord there is absolutely no benefit in the baptism.

Furthermore, it is not “calling on the name of the Lord” *plus* baptism that results in the washing away of sins. To do this would be adding our work to the work of Christ, who lived and died and rose again for our salvation. It would mean that Jesus is not sufficient as a Savior. Our salvation would also be dependent upon our own baptismal actions as well as the efforts of another to baptize us. A right relationship with God would no longer be totally by the grace of God. Part of the glory of our salvation would then belong to us because we participated in the righteous act of baptism.

But Paul contends in Titus 3:5, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.” God saves us, and He does so “through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,” not the washing of baptism. Notice that baptism is not mentioned at all in this passage. Although baptism is an important practice, if it were essential for salvation, we would always see it mentioned when the Bible talks about being made right with God. But as a reading of the New Testament passages on salvation will reveal, baptism is strikingly absent from many of these sections.

You Have Been United with Christ in His Death and Resurrection

Your submission to baptism also announces your faith in the Bible’s teaching about the believer’s identification with Christ. Read what the apostle Paul says about this great doctrine in Romans 6:3-5: “Or do you not know that as many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.”

It’s important to understand that the baptism spoken of here is not primarily water baptism but a spiritual baptism. When we are born again, the Holy Spirit baptizes, or places us, “into” Jesus Christ. Paul spoke similarly elsewhere when he said, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). So the Holy Spirit puts, or baptizes, us “into Christ Jesus” and “into one body,” i.e., the body of Christ.

Obviously these passages do not teach that we are *physically* placed into the *human* body of Jesus Christ. So this baptism is something done in the *spiritual* realm.

There is a mysterious, but true, spiritual unity that the Creator has created between Christ and those who believe in Him.

Notice that in Romans 6:3-5, God accounts our unity with Christ from the time of His death and resurrection and credits us with their benefits. God considers what happened to Jesus to have happened to you. You have received the punishment for your sins (by virtue of being united with Christ who received punishment) and have risen from the dead (in Christ), never to be subject to the penalty of sin again.

When you marry, you assume mutual ownership of both the debts and the wealth of your spouse. Even though you did nothing to gather either, they become yours. Similarly, when you are married to, that is, united with, Christ by faith, you share in the accrual of His work. In His love, He assumes the debt of all your sin against God and pays what is due. But He also allows you to share in His wealth – acceptance by God and eternal life. The value and accomplishments of what Jesus did two thousand years ago became your snow and forever when the Spirit of God we you to Christ.

Now here's the point: Water baptism symbolizes this unity. It is a statement of faith that you have been placed into Christ, bonded with Him spiritually. Receiving baptism with water expresses your belief that you have received the baptism of the Spirit into Christ. Why would anyone who has known the immeasurable blessing of eternal union with Jesus Christ not want to receive the sign of it?

Through Christ God Has Given You a New Life

Baptism announces to the world that you have a new life in Christ. You emerge from the baptismal experience a living testimony to the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

"I've been changed," your baptism exclaims: "I'm not the person I was before meeting Christ. I'm alive to God now. My life is different – my thoughts, my actions, my heart, my perspective – they're all new."

This symbolic connection between baptism and a new life is suggested in Romans 6:4: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in *newness of life*" (italics added). As noted earlier, this text speaks of spiritual baptism, i.e., being united with Christ, a reality symbolized by water baptism.

Jesus avowed, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), and proved it by His resurrection to new life. Those who have been united with the living Christ, the God-man who "was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father," are united with *life*. This new life – *eternal* life – transforms them from the inside out. Plated and growing within them are new loves (love for God, love for His Word, love for His people), new desires (for purity, for holy living, for heaven), new priorities (the will of God), and more. This is not merely turning over a new leaf, but being given a new *life*. Baptism is both a testimony to this new life within and a pledge to "walk in newness of life."

PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES REGARDING BAPTISM

Baptism is not a saving ritual.

Although this has been said already, it cannot be overemphasized. The error of salvation through baptism is universally one of the most common misconceptions of Christianity. You could be baptized once an hour for the rest of your life and never be right with God.

Even though baptism is an act of obedience to Jesus, it is *not* a *saving* act. The only saving act in history is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our responsibility is to believe in *that* work, not to try to augment it by baptism.

Baptism can strengthen your assurance of salvation.

In 1 Peter 3:21 baptism is connected to “the answer of a good conscience toward God.” If you neglect baptism, you can expect consequences in your conscience. This single act of disobedience could mean the difference between having and not having the assurance that you are right with God.

Several times in my pastoral experience I baptized people – young and old – who procrastinated about it. After they became Christians and were taught about baptism, they hesitated. The longer they delayed, the more uncertain they became of their relationship with Christ. Following baptism, however, their drooping spiritual life flourished like a wilted plant newly watered. I recall one case where not only family members but also unbelieving friends remarked about the change in the woman’s life following her baptism. The roots of her relationship with Christ deepened and she became much more fruitful.

Do you struggle with assurance of salvation? If you claim to follow Christ but you have never followed His commands to be baptized, your doubts are yet another signal of what you need to do.

Baptism is for you if you know Christ.

If you have had the experience symbolized by baptism, but have never been baptized, present yourself to your church as a candidate for baptism.

It’s easy to understand why someone who has never been united with Christ would have no desire for baptism. But why would anyone who has come to know Jesus Christ and received His eternal life refuse to identify with Him in the manner He prescribed? If others (perhaps even you) will proudly wear clothing announcing their loyalty to a sports team, if Giles Pellerin will travel the country for sixty-nine years to express his devotion to the USC football team, can you remain unwilling to identify yourself with your Savior and God through baptism?

Perhaps you will still have some unanswered questions. Talk with your pastor about them. Don’t put it off any longer. Do the will of Christ and be baptized.

As Saul of Tarsus was asked in Acts 22:16, “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized.”