

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

For someone who wasn't raised in church, baptism can seem like a funny, foreign thing. Why on earth would someone get in a swimming pool in his clothes and let some guy dunk him? For others, who have been raised in church, it's still kind of a mystery. Sometimes, people who have been raised in church abandon their faith and then find Jesus again and want to be re-baptized. Wasn't the first one good enough? Or someone who was christened as a baby gets baptized again as an adult. Didn't the first one count?

The Greek word in the New Testament that is translated "baptize" is *baptizo*. It is a Greek verb that never got translated. The Greek word was actually put in our text. That is where we get the word "baptize." It is really a Greek word with the end chopped off. Here is what the word means: literally "to dip" or "dunk" or "immerse." This word was used to describe ships sunk in battle, for someone who has drowned, figuratively of a person who was head and shoulders into debt, for dipping a cup into wine to draw wine, to talk about dying cloth – describes taking the cloth and submerging it until the cloth takes the dye, and about people who were swimming, bathing, etc.

It was a common everyday word. All throughout Ancient Greek times, this word was consistently used to talk about taking something and immersing it, dipping it, dunking it and drowning it in a liquid. There is an interesting usage that gives us a lot of insight around the time of Christ. Scholars found some writings by a physician named Necander. In part of his writings, he gives a recipe for making pickles 2000 years ago. In the recipe, he used the word "*baptizo*." You take the pickle and 'baptize" it in vinegar. That was the word he used – it was not a religious word. That was the word they used for dip, dunk or immerse. Just out of curiosity, I checked into the pickle-making process. It takes five weeks of soaking to transform a cucumber into a pickle. Maybe we are not keeping people under long enough and maybe that is why they want to be re-baptized! (Just kidding.)

In New Testament times, the Jewish community had begun to use this word to describe something they did in a religious context. They had a process that a non-Jewish person could go through to become a Jew. Let's say you lived in Jerusalem and you saw Jewish worship and you believed that Yahweh was the One True God. You grew up in a pagan household where you worshiped idols. So you said to your Jewish friends, "Is there anyway I convert to your way?" You had to take a certain kind of meal, learn the law, clean up your house, and then at the end of the process, you were *baptizo*'d. No one *baptizo*'d you, you would *baptizo* yourself! Essentially you would go down to the river with eyewitnesses or to a cistern or anywhere with a lot of water. You would go down and would immerse yourself underwater. That was to symbolize you were dying to your Gentile-ness and coming alive to your newfound faith in Judaism. Again, they didn't even use the word "*baptizo*" consistently. Sometimes they would use other Greek words to describe this process of immersing or dipping under water because *baptizo* was not strictly a religious word. It was a very common word, and someone would say, "Look he is *baptizo*-ing."

Then something very unusual happened. One day down at the Jordan River, there was this fellow named John, who came from the wilderness and wore hairy clothing. A strange crazy guy who said, “Repent, repent the Messiah is coming! Prepare the way for the Messiah. The Messiah is coming!” He’d cry out in a loud voice, “You Jews who think you are so close to God but you are living in sin, you need to REPENT!” People began to gather and listen to this fellow. He said, “One is coming after me that I am not even worthy to tie his shoes. Repent, repent, and prepare the way for the Messiah.”

The people began to see themselves as they really were and realized that they had abandoned God. That they were Jewish by name but not in practice. They began to repent and come to John and **John did something that historically had never been done before. This is the first time in recorded history this ever happened. John took people down into the water with him and held them in some capacity and he dunked them. People said, “he is baptizo-ing them.”** They did not know what to call it for this had never happened before in recorded history. People began to say, “I believe what John is saying is true, and I am going to identify and show allegiance to his teaching and I am going to go public with my decision by associating with this fellow and allowing him to dunk me, immerse me, dip me, drown me, sink me, baptize me.” Since he was the only person doing this, people started calling him “John the Baptist.” This had never happened before, so he got a nickname.

Why did they use the word *baptizo* to associate with John? It was the word that best described what he was doing. Did you know there is a Greek word for just “sprinkle”? It is the word “*raino*”. It is used through the New Testament to describe the priests sprinkling blood on the altar. Another very common word. When it came to explaining what John was doing, they didn’t call him John Raino. I’m not trying to make a joke, just the point that they used the word “*baptizo*” and not “*raino*” to describe what he was doing. That became associated with his name.

Why do we immerse instead of sprinkling?

1. That is what the word means.
2. Historically that is what happened.
3. This is what was modeled for us in first century Christianity.

What is the meaning/significance of baptism? Why do we even do this? Why did Jesus have his disciples baptizing everybody?

The act of baptism communicates three things symbolically:

1. Baptism was always a sign of identification.

When John the Baptist baptized, people were identifying and swearing allegiance to his teaching. When a non-Jewish person dipped himself to become a Jew, he was identifying with Judaism and swearing allegiance to God of the Jews. In the same way when someone gets baptized in a Christian church, she is publicly identifying with Jesus Christ and His church. It is a way of saying, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel. I don’t care if people know that I am a Christian.” There is a form of identity and coming out or going public.

There is an interesting story in Acts 19. Some men heard John the Baptist preach and they were convinced that Jesus is coming. They were baptized by John and then went out into the countryside saying what John said. Meanwhile, Jesus came and they didn’t know about it because they were far away. The Messiah comes, lives his life, dies on the cross and goes home to the Father. Meanwhile, these guys are still out there going, “Repent, repent, the Messiah is coming.”

Years later, Paul bumps into these men. He says, “I hate to tell you this, but it is over. It has happened. You need to change your message. Jesus has come and gone.” They say, “We want to be baptized into the baptism of Jesus.” What they were saying was, “We identified with John the Baptist and now we want to go public with what you are saying, that Jesus has come and is the Messiah.” Paul re-baptized those fellows as they identified with this new truth that Jesus had come and died on the cross.

The central message behind baptism is a coming out, going public with your faith. Back then they baptized in the Jordan River where culture happened. People could quickly see who you were aligning with because it was so public.

2. Baptism is the symbolic death and resurrection.

This is a central part of baptism: the person being baptized is saying, “I have died to my old life and come alive to new life in Jesus Christ.”

We see baptism that way in different books of the Bible: Baptism into Christ, into his death, into his resurrection. Symbolic of a change that has already taken place.

3. Baptism represents a cleansing, a washing away of sin.

This doesn’t mean that being baptized washes away your sins. The Bible clearly says that it is the blood of Jesus alone that cleanses us from sin. But it is a symbol of your sins being washed away.

What baptism is NOT. It is not part of the salvation process. A person isn't saved *because* he is baptized. Baptism is just a symbol on the outside of something that has already happened on the inside.

When Jesus was crucified, one of the thieves hanging near him said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus didn't say, "Too late! You haven't been baptized." Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

So what if you were "sprinkled"? Did it count? The answer to that question doesn't lie in the context of HOW you were baptized as much as it does the meaning of what you did. God is a big God. God isn't going to fall off his throne if you got sprinkled instead of dunked. If I am in the Sahara desert and you become a Christian and you want to be baptized and I have ½ a canteen of water, I'm not going to say, "Sorry, you can't be baptized." The issue is the meaning you attached to your baptism. Dunking a person under water or sprinkling water on their head is not a baptism. It is the meaning attached to that event that makes it a baptism. It is not getting wet that makes you baptized. Neither form makes you baptized. It is the meaning you attach to the form that gives it significance.

If you were christened as a baby, you have not been baptized. It was a very meaningful event. Your parents dedicated you to God. Your parents may have believed that by having you christened or baptized as a baby that you became a Christian at that time. Your parents were doing what they thought was right and doing what they knew to do. It probably helped them focus at that time on being a better parent and raising you a certain way. That is why we would never discount what happened. We have babies dedicated because that is an important time in the life of a family. But that is not baptism. It was not about your decision but about a decision your parents made on your behalf.

What if you were baptized as a child? Maybe you grew up in church, and all your friends were doing it. It was meaningful in a way, but not really a personal expression so much as church peer pressure to take the next step. You were not going public about a decision you made for Christ. That is not baptism.

Are you ready to be baptized? There is something real about baptism. The first step is making the decision to allow Jesus to be the Lord of your life. If you are not a Christian, we would love to help you take the next step. If you are now ready to say to family and friends, "I'm going public with my decision to trust Christ." That is what baptism means. It means identifying with Jesus Christ. It is representative to the fact that you died to an old way of life and came alive to a new way of life. It is representative of the fact that you have been washed by the blood of Jesus and your sins have been forgiven.

When you are ready to go public, we want to help you come before this church and say, "I believe and I don't mind if the whole world knows!" That is why we are going to do a short one-minute video of you, to give you the chance to tell your story. We will let you do your video as many times as you want until you have said what you wanted to say. You may share your faith with more people in that short interval than you may get to share in the rest of your life. You never know what your little piece or story is going to do in the life or heart of someone else. So we ask everyone to share their story others.