

What is Baptism?

We've all been through some kind of initiation that welcomes us into a new stage of life. Maybe you remember your graduation from kindergarten. Or the feeling of flipping your tassel on that stiff hat when you graduated high school. Or the excitement of being issued your ID badge and computer for that first day at work. Every important community you join or life stage that you enter includes some sort of rite of passage to mark the occasion.

For almost two thousand years, the followers of Jesus have recognized a similar event that celebrates a new stage of life for the individual and marks his or her entrance into a new community. That practice is baptism. On the one hand, this event is simply the initiation ceremony of becoming a Christian. On the other hand, this event marks the mysterious and supernatural occurrence of God's redemption of one of His children. It is a simple event that can happen almost anywhere, but it is a deeply theological moment representing spiritual realities being changed forever.

Where did baptism come from?

Christians aren't the first ones to practice a ceremonial cleansing with spiritual significance. The Jews practiced this before Jesus' day as part of their regular worship of God. In the first century, the Jews introduced an event similar to baptism as part of the conversion process for non-Jews who wanted to become Jewish.

Then Jesus came on the scene and declared, *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."* (John 3:5)

Jesus took a common practice of ritual cleansing and turned it into the standard ceremony for entering the kingdom of God. He made baptism the method by which His followers would declare their allegiance to Him. At the end of His ministry on earth, He instructed His followers to spread the message of the gospel that He preached and to welcome people into a relationship with Him through baptism. In Matthew, He says, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* (Matt 28:18-19)

Because Jesus closely associated following Him with the act of baptism, we believe that baptism is an extremely important symbol of accepting the salvation that He offers us. Baptism is the wedding of the Christian life. You don't have to have a wedding to get married: there are other ways to officially become united with someone else in a marriage bond. But a wedding celebrates the entrance into married life in a unique way. While baptism is not necessary to being a Christian, it celebrates the reality of salvation in a powerful way.

What does baptism mean?

Getting baptized represents the act of changing your allegiance. First, you join yourself to Christ by accepting the salvation that He offers. Second, you join yourself to the community of Christ-followers who make up the kingdom of God. While baptism is a symbolic event, it has deep theological significance. Something "happens" when you are baptized—it is not an empty ritual. Your baptism tells the story of the gospel in a powerful way, reminding you and proclaiming it to those around you.

Your new life with Christ

The power of baptism lies in how it expresses the truth of salvation so graphically. Christians believe that God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to sacrifice Himself for the sins of the world (John 3:16). The forgiveness of sins that Jesus' death offers us restores the relationship with God that He created us to enjoy. The author of Hebrews encourages us to *draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.* (Heb 10:22)

Being washed by the water of baptism shows us that we have been washed clean from the sins that used to characterize our life. By accepting the salvation that Jesus offers, we receive God's forgiveness from our sins.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. (Isa 1:14)

Baptism represents a bath that washes our scarlet sins away and leaves us clean. We are not saved through baptism. We are saved through the death of Christ. His death cleanses us from our sins. But baptism illustrates that salvation in a way that anyone can understand. Because we are clean, we are now able to enter into the presence of God the Father confident that He loves us.

Baptism also portrays you as joining with Christ in His death and resurrection. Before becoming a Christian, Paul says you were *alienated from God and were enemies because of your evil behavior.* (Col 1:21)

Accepting the offer of salvation in Christ means that you have died to your old life and come back to life with a new way to live. The person who used to be alienated from God has died. You are a new creation, born into a restored relationship with God the Father. Baptism recounts that death and resurrection:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Rom 6:3-4)

Going underwater dramatically depicts dying to your old life characterized by sin and guilt. Coming up from the water depicts your joyful resurrection. Baptism represents the beginning of your new spiritual life. In the same way that birth brings a new baby into the world, baptism is a rebirth that brings a new believer into the world. After you become a Christian, you are not the same person. You have been given a new life with Christ.

Your new family

Just as baptism expresses your new allegiance to Christ, it also celebrates your new allegiance to Christ's family: the church. With your newly restored relationship to God the Father comes a new relationship to all His other children. You have new brothers and sisters throughout the world and across history. Baptism celebrates that entrance into a new community.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. (Eph 2:19)

When you get baptized, you are formally welcomed into this new household. For this reason, baptism should be a public event, allowing your local family of faith to participate and welcome you into their midst.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. (1 Cor 12:13)

Not only are you part of a new family, but everyone in that family is on equal footing. We've all been forgiven our sins because of the death of Christ: none of us deserve to be part of the family on our own merit. Baptism declares us all to be in this together: everyone the same, no one better than anyone else.

When should I be baptized?

At Peninsula Bible Church, we practice "believer baptism." That means that we baptize someone after he or she has made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. We believe that baptism represents the spiritual change and community acceptance that have already occurred when you receive salvation through Christ. We encourage people to be baptized immediately after placing their faith in Christ. There is no reason to wait. You do not need to be more mature before you are baptized. In Acts, when Philip shared the gospel with an Ethiopian on his way home, he got baptized immediately after accepting the message.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" (Acts 8:36)

If you'd like to be baptized at PBC, we do not require any special classes or introductions. We only want to make sure you understand salvation through Christ and have received that salvation for yourself. This usually happens through an informal conversation with a pastor or the person coordinating the baptism event. At times, we invite people being baptized to share their testimonies as part of the event, either immediately before being baptized or through a written or video testimony prepared in advance, but we do not require them to do so.

What about infant baptism?

Because we believe in baptizing people who have accepted Jesus' offer of forgiveness, we do not baptize infants. For families in our community that have young children, we practice a family dedication ceremony. This event celebrates the entrance of a new child into our community and recognizes the shared responsibility of the community in introducing this child to God through Christ.

For people who have been baptized as infants prior to attending our church, we do not require that you be re-baptized as an adult. We will gladly baptize adults who have been baptized as infants, but we will also recognize someone baptized as an infant who has subsequently made a profession of faith in Christ as a baptized follower of Christ. If you have been baptized as an infant, you may choose whether or not to be baptized as an adult and we will support whatever decision you make. Pastors are available and willing to discuss this choice with you if you'd like.

Conclusion

Baptism is an exciting and mysterious time. Accepting the salvation that God offers through Christ and entering into His kingdom as it unfolds here on earth and continues into eternity is the most significant event that can take place for someone. If you consider yourself a Christian and have not been baptized, we strongly recommend that you celebrate your association with Christ and the community of faith by being baptized. If you have recently become a follower of Christ, there is no reason to wait to be baptized. If you have additional questions, feel free to contact one of our pastors. May God bless you in this decision.