

# Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

## Day 35

### What Is the Significance of Baptism?

A regular part of Christian worship is the practicing of ordinances or sacraments. *Ordinance* refers generally to any kind of a rule or regulation established by an authority, and specifically, to a religious rite or ceremony. Some denominations use the term *sacrament*, meaning “something that is sacred or holy,” which has the additional idea of a channel of divine grace, that is, God makes his grace available in a special way through those ceremonial practices.

Those denominations that prefer the term *ordinance* do not understand these practices to be channels of divine grace in any unusual way. Rather, they are God-given means by which Christians remind themselves of foundational truths in our faith, and believers practice them in obedience to our Savior, who has commanded us to do these things regularly.

All churches and denominations agree that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are to be regularly practiced as divine ordinances. We will consider baptism in this chapter and the Lord’s Supper in chapter 36.

The importance of baptism can be seen in the example of Jesus himself being baptized by John the Baptist ([Matthew 3:13–17](#)). As a part of the Great Commission, Jesus also commanded his followers to baptize as they made disciples ([Matthew 28:19](#)). So for Christ-followers, baptism is not optional but mandatory. Luke documents that the early church was faithful to follow Jesus’ command ([Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12–13, 36–38; 9:18; 10:47–48](#)). Baptism was so important to first-century Christians that there really is no such New Testament thing as an “unbaptized believer.” The pattern—clearly and repeatedly—was believe and *immediately* be baptized.

The general concept of baptism is identification or association with something or someone. It was common in the Greco-Roman mystery religions, and so most Gentiles would have been familiar with it. The Jews required baptism in their conversion rituals for Gentiles, so Jews too understood the concept. There are several types of baptism in the New Testament, for example, the baptism of John the Baptist ([Matthew 3:6](#)); baptism into Moses ([1 Corinthians 10:2](#)), and baptism by the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). All of these have in common the idea of identification or association.

*Christian* (water) baptism, then, means identification or association with Jesus Christ and his gospel. In **Romans 6:1–11**, Paul says that Christians were baptized into Christ, but more specifically into his death, burial, and resurrection (**v. 4**). The point he's making is that the believer has already died, already been buried, and already been resurrected with Christ in a *spiritual* sense, and is therefore dead to sin and alive to God. So Christian baptism is best understood as an outward (physical/visible) indication of an inward (spiritual/invisible) reality; it is a means by which a believer publicly proclaims his or her faith in and identification with Christ.

Some churches do believe in what is called “baptismal regeneration,” meaning that it is necessary for a person to be baptized in order to become a Christian. However, this seems to contradict the biblical teaching that we are saved not based on anything we do for God but only on what God has done for us through Jesus. Paul vehemently argued against the necessity of circumcision for salvation (**Romans 3:30; 4:9–12; see also Acts 15:1–29**), because that would fit into the category of human works, which have nothing to do with our salvation. Baptism would seem to fit into the same category.

Sometimes **Acts 2:38** is used to support baptismal regeneration. Here Peter tells people, *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”* In light of all New Testament teaching regarding how to be saved by God’s grace alone through our faith in Jesus Christ alone, what Peter said probably is best understood to reflect the close association between becoming a Christian and *then* being baptized (in that order). So baptism is not necessary to become a Christian but is important for someone to do who believes; it is a matter of obedience.

## **Who to Baptize?**

Who should be baptized? Historically, there have been two answers: Some believe infants can and should be baptized, and others believe only those old enough to exercise personal faith in Christ should be baptized.

Those who practice *infant baptism*, also known as **paedobaptism**, argue that Christian baptism is the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision under the Abrahamic Covenant. In the Old Testament, Hebrew baby boys were circumcised and considered a part of God’s covenant community—the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, under the New Covenant, baptism is the God-given means by which children are welcomed into the community of faith in Christ. This link is seen in **Colossians 2:11–12**.

The argument is also made that household conversions and baptisms ([e.g., Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8](#)) must have included infants. Also, Jesus received children into the kingdom of God and told his followers to do the same ([Mark 10:14–16](#)). We are to do this by means of baptism. In addition, when Peter said, “*Repent and be baptized*” (see above), he went on to say: “*The promise is for you and your children*” ([Acts 2:38–39](#)). This practice was taught by the early church fathers and can be documented back to the second century. It is practiced today by the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, and Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches.

Those who practice [believer's baptism](#) say there are no explicit New Testament examples of infants being baptized. The paedobaptist assumption that infants were part of household conversions is just that: an assumption; the text does not explicitly say. But there are many explicit examples of new believers being baptized, that is, those old enough to understand the gospel and make a personal decision of faith in Christ ([Matthew 28:19; John 4:1–2; Acts 2:41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:14–15, 32–34; 18:8](#)). This makes sense, because the only way to be saved is through faith, and infants are not old enough to grasp what must be understood and believed in the content of the gospel. Believer's baptism is practiced by Baptist churches, Evangelical Free churches, and many independent or nondenominational churches.

## **How to Baptize?**

How should baptism be done? Three modes have been practiced through church history.

The practice of [sprinkling](#) is based on the Old Testament rituals of sprinkling with blood to cleanse from sin or disease ([e.g., Exodus 24:6–8; Leviticus 1:11; 14:7](#)). This mode of Christian water baptism was not regularly used until the thirteenth century.

A second mode of baptism is [pouring](#), which symbolizes the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the believer ([Acts 2:17–18](#)). Drawings in the catacombs of Rome depict this practice.

The final mode of baptism is [immersion](#). The argument in favor is that this is exactly what the Greek word *baptizō* means—to plunge, dip, or immerse. This mode also best illustrates the believer's spiritual death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, as described in [Romans 6:3–4](#). Immersion seems to be the standard practice of the early church from the first century.

## **INTERESTING FACT**

In addition to the Lord's Supper and baptism, the Roman Catholic Church also observes marriage, confirmation, holy orders, penance, and extreme unction (anointing the sick or

dying) as sacraments. A few Protestant denominations observe foot washing as an ordinance.