

# The Meaning and Practice of Baptism

## NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH OF CHICO

### Preface

‘It is not baptism itself that saves, but God through grace who enables repentance and faith, of which baptism is a primary mystery, sacramental act, sign, and evidence.’

-- Thomas Oden, Systematic

Theology III

The fact you’ve picked up this booklet indicates you are interested in being baptized. Great! We’re glad you are considering this very important and deeply sacred step of faith.

As you will see, baptism is one of the most meaningful events in a Christian’s life. It is, in fact, what introduces us into the Christian life. It is a wonderfully multifaceted experience packed with significance, and this booklet will introduce you to some of the many blessings it entails. It is our hope that, after reading the text and responding to the workbook questions, you will want to attend our Baptism class, then take this step of full identification with the Lord.

So... read, pray, and reflect deeply on the astounding drama of salvation God has performed for us. May your heart be overwhelmed with wonder as you contemplate God’s grace, which really is – as the hymn says – nothing short of ‘amazing!’

The Pastoral Staff  
Neighborhood Church of Chico

# Introduction

Since the time of Christ, the Christian Church has observed the practice of baptism to introduce men and women into the Christian life and the life of the Church. Today, virtually every Christian church<sup>1</sup>, regardless of denomination or nationality, observes this rite or sacrament.<sup>2</sup> It is the formal means by which a person becomes a part of Christ's Church. Churches may differ as to the precise mode of baptism: some immerse, others pour, still others sprinkle. But all churches agree on the centrality of baptism as the initiating rite of a new Christian's life.

It is important to understand from the start that Scripture speaks of baptism as a single, unified reality<sup>3</sup> with two parts: an invisible component involving the Holy Spirit's work in and to us, and a visible 'sign' involving our use of water to symbolize the invisible transaction. We'll talk about this more below.

Because of the centrality of baptism, it is essential we understand what baptism is, what it signifies, and the role it serves in our discipleship. This booklet is designed to explain these things. It is intended for those who are candidates for baptism at Neighborhood Church, and is the basis for the baptismal class that prepares candidates for the sacrament. The booklet contains two sections: an explanatory text and a brief workbook. After you've read the text, please take time to fill out the workbook. This will be discussed in the baptism class, so bring your completed workbook with you to class.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few minor splinter groups that abstain from water baptism for assorted reasons, but they are definitely at variance with orthodox Christian tradition.

<sup>2</sup> A sacrament is a symbol signifying a deeper, spiritual meaning. It is not merely a physical act. Through sacraments, the Christian participates in deep spiritual realities. Sacraments, then, are important 'means of grace' that enable us to access God's transforming presence and power and grow in Christlikeness. In the Protestant tradition, there are two Christian sacraments: baptism and Holy Communion.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Eph 4:4-6; 1 Cor 12:13 and Rom 6:1-4.

# Salvation and baptism

Jesus Christ, the second Person of the triune God, came to earth for the purpose of saving sinners: people who were alienated from God by virtue of their selfish, destructive behavior and in need of reconciliation and transformation. Christ became a man, lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father through the power of the Spirit, died a sacrificial death to make payment for our sins, then rose from the dead to make our full restoration possible.

When He was preparing to leave the earth and return to heaven, Jesus commanded His followers to practice baptism as an ongoing sacrament. The fullest statement of this is found in the final chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew<sup>4</sup>:

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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18–20).

This passage tells us several important things. First, it indicates the Church is instrumental to Christ's redemptive work on earth. The Church is not optional for Christians or incidental to God's purposes: it is central to accomplishing God's will. Second, it tells us the Church is to raise up disciples (meaning 'learners,' 'practitioners,' or 'apprentices'), not simply to make converts. Third, it clarifies that baptism is essential to this process of discipleship. In fact, a person's life of discipleship begins when that person is introduced into the Trinitarian life of God through baptism. We will discuss this in more detail in the sections that follow.

## Basic Meaning

The English word 'baptize' is a transliteration of the Greek term baptizein, which means to dip, immerse, submerge, or wash. The basic idea is that of placing one thing into another such that the first thing is

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<sup>4</sup> All scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted. For another account of Christ's 'Great Commission,' see Mark 16:15–18.

fundamentally changed as a result. First century merchants were said to 'baptize' cloth in vats of dye. The cloth was placed into the vat and was changed by absorbing the dye into its fibers. The cloth, once white in color, was now red, having taken on the properties of the dye. In a similar way, people were said to be 'baptized' in fear or anger: they absorbed these emotions so thoroughly that they were changed by them and exhibited behavior consistent with that change.

Baptism was practiced by the Jews before and during New Testament times. Certain sects baptized Gentile converts, non-Jews who wished to renounce their old way of life and be identified with the God of the Jews and His teachings. When these converts were baptized, this symbolized a change in their identity: no longer were they who they once were; they were 'new' in an important way.

Jesus and the New Testament authors borrowed the language of baptism to communicate an important spiritual truth: when a person becomes a Christian, the person is placed into the Body of Christ and joined organically to Christ Himself, who is the head of His Body. This results in a radical change within the person. Once a sinner, s/he is now a saint; once 'dead in transgressions and sins,' s/he is now 'made alive with Christ' (Eph 2:1,5); once captive to the 'dominion of darkness,' s/he is now brought into the 'kingdom of light' (Col 1:12,13). In other words, his/her baptism by Christ into His Body, the Church, by the Holy Spirit results in a fundamental change within his/her deepest self. S/he becomes something s/he was not before. S/he is, in short, a 'new creation in Christ' (2 Cor 5:17). This is a stunning and revolutionary claim, yet the New Testament assures us it is true!

## One baptism, two aspects

In the New Testament, Christian baptism is spoken of as a single reality. We are not baptized into the body of Christ, then baptized into water, then baptized with the Holy Spirit, as though these were three separate events. Rather, our baptism is a single, unified reality, even though the invisible dimension (what we might call 'Spirit baptism') and the physical dimension (water baptism) may take place days, weeks, or even years apart. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6, emphasis added). One baptism

but different facets. So let's briefly discuss these two aspects or dimensions of baptism.

The first aspect of baptism is invisible to the human eye. It occurs when an individual places his/her trust in Jesus Christ as his/her savior and Lord. In that moment, God forgives and cleanses all his/her sins (Rom 10:9; Col 1:21–22), applies the righteousness of Christ to him/her (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 3:21–23), and accepts him/her fully as His child (Eph 1:4–5). S/he is also baptized by Christ through His Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ, His Church (John 1:33; 1 Cor 12:13). The Holy Spirit takes up residence in him/her (Rom 8:9–11; Titus 3:5–6) and begins to bear fruit in his/her life in the form of godly character (Gal 5:22–23). S/he is 'born again' or 'born of the Spirit' (John 3:3–8). S/he is saved from the dominating power of sin and becomes a citizen of heaven (Rom 6:5–14; Phil 3:20). S/he spiritually dies to her old way of life and is resurrected in Christ to experience a whole new mode of existence called 'eternal life' or 'life in abundance' (Rom 6:3; John 10:10). As a new creation, s/he is joined to Christ and is now able to access God's infinite resources of power, authority, and grace (Eph 1:17–21). In short, this experience of conversion or regeneration (being "born again") or 'Holy Spirit baptism' refers to exactly the same event – the point in time when a person is fully and finally joined to and identified with Jesus Christ. This is a complex, multi-variegated event. To summarize, this invisible aspect of baptism includes, among other things:

- Forgiveness – we are forgiven of all our sins by the Father by virtue of Christ's atoning death on the cross (Heb 10:14; Rom 5:1).
- Reconciliation – we are restored to full fellowship with God and are no longer enemies but friends and children of God (2 Cor 3:18–20; Col 1:21–22).
- Justification – we are 'justified,' made righteous, having Christ's perfect righteousness put to our account and our sin exchanged for his righteousness (Rom 5:1; 2 Cor 5:21).
- Regeneration – we are born again, made new by the power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in a change of our character and deepest desires and giving us a hatred of sin and a love for God, holiness, His people and purposes. His Spirit begins to bear his fruit, or character, in our behavior (John 3:3–6; Titus 3:5–6; Gal 5.22–23).

- Union – we are joined to Christ, made one with Him as part of His Body, which comprises all believers in every age and in every part of the world (John 15:1–8; 1 Cor 12:12–14). And because Christ is in heaven, we are, in a true sense, taken up into the very life of the Trinitarian God (Eph 2:6)!
- Empowerment – we are given access to God’s unlimited power, authority, and resources in Christ, able to now exercise these on His behalf to accomplish His purposes (Eph 1:18–21). We are also given unique spiritual enablements by His Holy Spirit (such as prophesy, teaching, administration, and healings) for the purpose of ministering to the Church and the world (1 Cor 12:4–11; Rom 12:6–8).

As you can see, this invisible aspect of baptism is an astonishingly complex and comprehensive reality!

The second aspect of baptism is visible and physical. It involves placing the new Christian in water to symbolize the invisible reality that has taken place in his life. It isn’t merely a ritual. It is a sacrament: a deeply spiritual and mysterious transaction which enables the believer to actually participate in the spiritual reality it symbolizes. It is a sacred and profound experience, and it brings to completion the person’s baptism. Water baptism takes place after our conversion (ideally, soon after) and points backward to the ‘Spirit baptism’ that was part of our regeneration.

So, when we are dunked under the water, the action symbolizes several things:

- Our cleansing from sin. At the most basic level, baptism pictures the sinner’s cleansing from defilement. Just as the water washes from the body any dirt on our skin, so the Holy Spirit cleanses our hearts from any and all spiritual defilement (1 Peter 3:21–22; Acts 22:16).
- Our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. We go into the water as people who are ‘dead in sins’; we are ‘buried’ as the waters cover us; we are ‘resurrected’ when we emerge from the water wet and changed (Rom 6:2–4). The ‘wetness’ shows we are different from who we were before we were dunked.
- Our being immersed into the life of the Spirit. The Spirit is sometimes metaphorically represented as water (John 7:37–39).

Thus, our being plunged into water symbolizes our being plunged into the life of the Spirit, with all the life, freedom, power, joy, and wonder it entails.

- Our being relocated to a new realm or mode of existence. As land creatures by nature, water is an alien environment to us. In water baptism, we are put in a new environment (water) such that we are changed (we become wet!). This act symbolizes a deeper, spiritual reality: as sinners by nature, we are transferred from the kingdom of sin and Satan into the realm of God, and we are dramatically changed as a result (Col 1:12–13).
- Our union with Christ. By symbolically identifying us with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, baptism underscores our new, organic connection with Him in every dimension of His existence (2 Cor 5:14; Eph 2:1–6). He is the vine, and we are branches joined to Him, capable of bearing good fruit by means of His life-giving Spirit in us (John 15:1–7).
- Our identification with the entire Church. Jesus Himself was baptized and so have all Christ-followers throughout the centuries. Water baptism pictures our being placed into the Body of Christ. We are thus able to identify with every believer who has ever lived (Eph 4:3–6; 1 Cor 12:12–13).

Let's conclude this section by considering some of the more frequently asked questions surrounding baptism.

## FAQs

Who should be baptized?

Every person who has put his/her faith in Jesus Christ as savior and Lord

(Acts 2:41). This includes men and women (Acts 8:12) and children who have an understanding of the gospel and a genuine faith (Acts 16:33,34). Baptism is preceded by a personal conversion experience (a 'turning' to God from sin). This involves repenting of and confessing our sins and believing that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make it possible for us to be made right with God (Matt 3:6–8; Acts 2:38,41; 8:12,18; 16:31). True faith involves

three things: an assent of the mind, a trust of the heart, and a decision of the will.

A non-Christian should not be baptized since baptism expresses our identification with, personal trust in, and commitment to, Jesus Christ. Obviously, someone who has not had that experience does not want to pretend as if he/she has. But non-Christians should see in baptism a picture of the incomprehensible salvation God has made available to us and respond to Him in loving wonder and trust!

When should a Christian be baptized?

In New Testament times Christians were baptized immediately after their conversion (cf. Acts 2, 8, 16). This, it seems, is the best way to preserve the continuity between the two aspects of 'Spirit baptism' and water baptism. However, in most cases, those baptized in the earliest days of the church were familiar with the scriptures, the God they proclaim, and the moral law they contain. This is because most of them were either Jews or Gentile 'God fearers.' So they did not need a long period of instruction or catechesis to orient them to the Christian faith.

In later years, however, many of the converts to Christianity were pagans or members of other religions. So the Church began to observe a long period (sometimes up to two years) of time before a person was baptized, during which time they were carefully instructed in the foundational teachings of the Bible and the ethical dimensions of the Christian life.

So where does this leave us in our day? Our rule of thumb is this: the period of time between conversion and water baptism should be as short as possible, but long enough to insure the person thoroughly understands the meaning of baptism and salvation and the demands of the Christian life.

Should we baptize children?

Yes, as long as the child is old enough to understand the basic teachings of the gospel and put his/her faith in Christ in an authentic way. Parents will want to closely observe their kids to



determine whether or not they are ready for baptism. The best rule of thumb is: if in doubt, wait. But if you, as a parent, believe your child is ready for baptism, follow the directions in Appendix A and contact one of the pastors to discuss the matter. Jesus loves kids and wants to include them in His circle of fellowship (Lk 18:16–17)!

Certain traditions practice infant baptism, believing that the act of baptism operates on a subliminal level within the child and/or is a sign that they are members of the New Covenant, just as circumcision marked male members of the Old Covenant. Neighborhood Church does not practice infant baptism, believing that the New Testament gives no evidence of its practice in Apostolic times and that rational comprehension and volitional assent are requisite components of saving faith. Having said this, however, we would never quibble over the issue nor deny communion or other privileges to those baptized as infants!

Should we re-baptize people who were baptized as children?

Not necessarily. But if they request re-baptism and demonstrate an understanding of what it represents, then we are happy to administer baptism for them.

Which is the right way to baptize?

Because our ‘Spirit baptism’ is entire and complete (a kind of engulfment), the symbol of our baptism should match the spiritual reality as closely as possible. It is our belief that immersion in water, rather than sprinkling or pouring, best symbolizes this reality. So this is the normal way we administer baptism at Neighborhood Church.

However, in certain instances (a fear of water, a physical impairment making immersion difficult or impossible), we will baptize by pouring water over the head of the baptismal candidate.

Again, we refuse to quibble over matters of relative unimportance. We recognize the legitimacy of other modes of baptism and fully accept into our fellowship those who have been baptized via sprinkling or affusion (pouring).

Appendix B shows the baptismal procedure we typically follow.

Should we expect a 'second baptism,' a 'baptism of the Spirit?'

No. You are baptized by, of, and in the Spirit when you place your trust in Jesus Christ and you are placed into His Body. Contrary to the teaching of certain traditions, there is not a subsequent 'baptism of the Spirit' or 'Second work of grace.' Baptism is an initiatory rite, an inaugural event. It begins our journey in Christ. In this sense, it is unrepeatable, much as our physical birth is unrepeatable.<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say, however, that we do not have powerful and life-changing encounters with God subsequent to our initial conversion. We can and should have such experiences: they are a vital part of our ongoing relationship with God! They are necessary to our growth in intimacy with Him and to exercising His power and authority as we serve His Church and the world. Thus, while the Christian is baptized only once, he should expect to be 'filled' with the Spirit repeatedly as a normative part of a life of discipleship (see Acts 4:31; Eph 5:18).

Is water baptism required for salvation?

No. A person can be saved apart from water baptism, for it is the work of Christ alone that saves us (Eph 2:8–9; Titus 3:5; Rom 3:21–28). However, having said this, water baptism is an essential part of our baptism into Christ and His body; it is commanded by our Lord; and it is a spiritually rich experience of immense importance (Matt 28:19–20). For all these reasons, we regard water baptism as an essential part of our Christian discipleship and believe that any resistance to it because of fear, embarrassment, or apathy is a form of disobedience.

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<sup>5</sup> This is suggested by Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, for example, in John 3 in which Jesus draws a parallel between physical birth and spiritual birth. See John 3:1–8.



This piece of artwork depicting a Christian being baptized comes from catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter located beneath the streets of Rome. It demonstrates how the early church understood baptism as essentially a single event. Note that the man is standing in water. The person baptizing him is effaced; only his hand remains, positioned on the head of the baptismal candidate. Above the candidate, the Holy Spirit is pouring out His grace on him. Thus, 'Spirit baptism' and water baptism are conceived as a unitary and integrated event.

# Workbook

1. Can you summarize the meanings of both the invisible and the visible aspects of baptism? How are they two different?
2. Read Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:36–37; 10:47; 16:14–15; 16:30–33; 18:8 and 19:5. What one requirement must be met before anyone is to be baptized?
3. What meaning or implications does this study of baptism have for you personally?
4. What questions do you have about baptism?

5. Briefly write out the testimony of your journey with Christ. To help you organize your thoughts, you may find it helpful to think through the following:

What my life was like before I met Christ

How I met Christ

What my life is like now, including changes that God has made in me

# Appendix A: Water Baptism for Kids

## Guiding your child into baptism

1. Ask God for discernment into your child's heart. Ask Him to help you determine whether your child has an informed faith and whether he/she is ready to be baptized.
2. Read through the baptismal booklet and put it into terms your child can understand. Use stick drawings, stories, and other instructional tools as necessary. Work through the workbook portion with him/her.
3. Ask your child what s/he knows about baptism. Here are some possible questions to use:
  - ✓ Have you ever seen anybody baptized before? What happened?
  - ✓ Do you know why people get baptized?
  - ✓ Who should be baptized?
4. Read a story about baptism, like Acts 8:26–38 or Acts 16:34. (Possible questions)
  - ✓ Did these people believe in Jesus before Philip/Paul met them?
  - ✓ Did Philip/Paul tell them about what Jesus did for them?
  - ✓ What was their response to the message about Jesus?
  - ✓ What did they do after they believed in Jesus?
5. Look at what Jesus taught about baptism (Matthew 28:18–20).
  - ✓ He gave authority to His disciples to baptize new believers
  - ✓ He expected all of His followers to be baptized
6. Look at Acts 2, especially vv. 36–39. (Possible questions)
  - ✓ What did Peter tell the people who believed in Jesus to do?

- ✓ What did Peter tell the people about what baptism meant?
  - That they identified with Jesus Christ by faith
  - That their sins were forgiven by Jesus
  
- 7. Ask your child if s/he believes in Jesus Christ. (Possible questions)
  - ✓ What has Jesus done for you on the cross?
  - ✓ Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins?
  - ✓ Have you trusted Jesus to be your Savior? What does that mean to you?
  - ✓ Tell me about when you asked Jesus into your life
  
- 8. Ask your child if he/she wants to be baptized (Possible questions)
  - ✓ Jesus wants all of his followers to be baptized, would you like to be baptized?
  - ✓ When would you like to be baptized?
  - ✓ Is there someone in particular you would like to participate in your baptism? (For example: a parent, youth leader, pastor, or elder?)

## A checklist for a child's baptism

- I have read the booklet on baptism to my child and worked through the workbook with him/her.
  
- I have determined, through discussion and prayer, that my child has definitely trusted Jesus as his/her Savior and knows what Christ has done for him/her.
  
- I am persuaded my child understands that baptism:
  - ✓ Is for believers only
  - ✓ Shows our faith in Jesus, the forgiveness of our sins, a desire to live our lives to please Jesus
  - ✓ Does not make us a Christian, but completes our baptismal experience and shows we are Christians
  
- I have verified that my child desires to be baptized
  
- I have discussed with my child the procedure of being baptized (Appendix B)

- I have attended the baptismal class with my child
- I have contacted one of the pastors to make baptismal arrangements

## Appendix B: Baptismal Procedure

- Pray: Ask the Lord to prepare your heart for your baptism. Meditate on those verses in this booklet that explain the different facets of our salvation, praise God for His gracious provision, and invite Him to reveal to you your sin so you can repent of it and enter the waters of baptism with a pure heart, a clean conscience, and an attitude of humility, wonder, and gratitude. Ask the Lord if He might make your baptism especially meaningful, perhaps even giving you some special spiritual gift through your baptism. And pray for those you invite to your baptism, that the Lord would use your baptism to speak to them.
- Come ready to get wet. Wear clothing that will not be revealing when it is wet. And bring a towel and an extra set of clothing to change into after you dry off.
- Come early to meet with the pastor who will be administering your baptism. He/she will let you know the time to meet.
- Follow the pastor's direction. Baptismal candidates will enter the water one at a time.
- Be prepared to answer the questions the pastor asks you before your baptism. He/she will tell you ahead of time what to expect.



- ❑ Follow the pastor's cues during your baptism:
  - You will cross both your hands over your chest (one may be used to pinch your nose if desired)
  - The pastor, having one hand over your hands and one hand on your back, will tip you backwards under the water while you bend your knees. Once the water covers your face, the pastor will lift you up as you straighten your knees.
  - Rejoice! The Church will celebrate with you when you come up out of the water.
  
- ❑ Dry off and celebrate with your friends and family! This is a great time for a special celebratory meal.

Suggestions:

- ❑ Fast: We suggest you abstain from food on the day of your baptism to sharpen your spiritual appetite and your focus on Him.
  
- ❑ Memorize the Apostle's Creed (See Attachment C) as a distillation of your faith in the Christian message. This has been used by the Church in baptismal services for nearly 1900 years, and we sometimes make use of it in our baptismal events.

## Appendix C: The Apostle's Creed

(c. 150 in Rome per Justo Gonzales, The Story of Christianity, p. 63)

I believe in God,  
the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ,  
his only son,  
our Lord,  
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,  
born of the virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
Was crucified,  
died,  
and was buried.

He descended to the dead.  
The third day he rose again and ascended into heaven.  
He sits at the right hand of the Father and will  
come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Christian church,  
the communion of the saints,

the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.  
Amen.