

GATEWAY CHURCH

The Meaning and Significance of Water Baptism

The Meaning

The words *baptism* and *baptize* were brought to English directly from the Greek word *baptidzo*, which means to dip, plunge, immerse, submerge; to cleanse or wash by dipping or submerging. Water baptism is a symbol of something that has already taken place in someone's heart. Water baptism is considered by our church fellowship to be an *ordinance*, which is a practice or ceremony that is observed because it has significant symbolic meaning attached to it. In most churches there are two ordinances observed: Water Baptism and Communion. Communion symbolizes the work of Jesus Christ on the cross when He gave His life for us; water baptism symbolizes the work of the Holy Spirit in us when we are born anew and become followers of Jesus Christ. It's important to understand that this believers' baptism we practice is not a replacement for or the equivalent to infant baptism. This is a completely different ordinance. We do practice the dedication of our children to God, which would be a parallel practice to infant baptism, but the water baptism we follow specifically represents having faith in Jesus Christ.

The pattern in scripture is that anyone who genuinely places their faith in Jesus Christ to save them and be their Lord can and should be baptized in water as a symbol of their faith and commitment. In Acts 2:38-39 the apostle Peter said, *"Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you and your children and to those far away – all who have been called by the Lord our God."* This shows that the only prerequisite for water baptism is repenting of our sins (turning from them to God), and it also shows that water baptism is meant to be for all believers.

The Pattern

There's a story in Acts chapter 8 where the apostle Philip was explaining from the scriptures to an Ethiopian eunuch how Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. In verses 36-38 it says: *As they rode along, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look! There's some water! Why can't I be baptized?" "You can," Philip answered, "if you believe with all your heart." And the eunuch replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." He ordered the carriage to stop, and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.* In this account we see that water baptism is a practice for anyone who places their faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

One of the questions that sometimes arises from those who become followers of Jesus in today's world is, *"Why should I be baptized?"* It's one thing to understand that baptism is available for every believer, but it's another thing to recognize baptism as something that every believer *should* do. There are some strong scriptural reasons to pursue water baptism as a believer.

The Reasons

First of all, being baptized follows Jesus' example. Matthew 3:13-17 says, *Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John didn't want to baptize him. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you," he said, "so why are you coming to me?" But Jesus said, "It must be done, because we must do everything that is right." So then John baptized him. After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him."*

Secondly, water baptism is expected as a part of repentance. In Acts 2:38 Peter said, *"Each of you **must** turn from your sins... and be baptized..."*

Thirdly, Jesus commanded leaders to baptize new disciples. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus said, *"Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Fourthly, it was the practice of the early church. If you read through the entire book of Acts, you will see that it was normal and expected for new believers to be baptized in water as a symbol of their faith in Jesus Christ.

In Mark 16:16 Jesus said, *“Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.”* It’s important to mention that the act of water baptism itself doesn’t save you from your sins or make you a follower of Jesus. It is only a symbol of what has already occurred. However, Jesus’ strong words about

refusing to believe bringing condemnation begs a question for those who *do* believe: Why would anyone who *does* believe *refuse* to be baptized?

There is no valid reason in scripture to refuse it. God is looking for complete openness in believers to follow His word to them. The scriptural pattern and the expectation of God is that true disciples will be baptized after they have believed.

Water baptism is a symbol of repentance (turning from sin to God). In Luke 3:3 talks about John the Baptist: *Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had turned from their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.*

The Significance

Water baptism is a symbol of being regenerated (born again, born anew) and cleansed from our sins. As we read before, in Acts 2:38 Peter said, *“Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”*

Water baptism is a symbol of union with Christ in spiritual death and resurrection. In Romans 6:3-5 the apostle Paul wrote: *Have you forgotten that when we became Christians and were baptized to become one with Christ Jesus, we died with Him? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with Him in his death, we will also be raised as he was.* Water baptism symbolizes that our sinful nature is crucified with Christ, our sins are buried with Him, and our spirits are resurrected to new life through His resurrection. In this way we are united together with Jesus, and baptism is a powerful portrayal of that.

We practice water baptism as a public event. You are declaring publicly that Jesus Christ is your Lord and you desire to follow Him for the rest of your life. We encourage you to embrace this with confidence. Professing your faith in Jesus and obeying Him in this way is worth enduring some nervousness. It is nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed of.

The Event

Remember that you are part of the body of Christ here at our church, and we are all rejoicing with you in this act of following Christ. It’s an exciting and faith-building event for all of us together.

We will provide you with a dark shirt and ask that you wear dark pants for your baptism. Also bring a towel and a change of clothes. You will be asked to remove your shoes and we will help you into and out of the baptismal tank.

When you are being baptized, be prepared to answer a question or two, such as: “Tell us how you came to be here today” or “Why do you want to be baptized today?” At that point we would love to hear a *brief* story of how you came to place your faith in Jesus Christ and came to the place of following Him in this way.

Remember to not expect a warm fuzzy feeling, a supernatural revelation, or some sort of cataclysmic event. Water baptism is not about a feeling or an elevated spiritual experience; it is an act of obedience and commitment that will indeed be a wonderful and meaningful event for you.

Be ready to embrace possible negative repercussions of this event, such as temptation to sin, doubt, discouragement, or even ridicule, rejection or persecution from others. Your enemy, the devil, does not want you to take a stand for Christ in this way, and others may be offended by it or hostile towards it – but consider it an honour to endure whatever comes your way, for the name of Christ.