

## Baptism

*What is the position of Grace Church concerning baptism and church membership?*

**Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."**

What is the position of Grace Church concerning baptism and church membership?

The issue of baptism is addressed in our Structural Doctrines: "Baptism is a one-time act of obedience and is an outward testimony of a person's belief in Christ. Baptism is a symbol of unity among believers and signifies a spiritual identification with Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Only those persons who profess a personal faith in Jesus Christ may be baptized. Immersion is the ideal means set forth in Scripture."

That being said, we fully understand that we have many people attending Grace who come from various backgrounds and that the issue of baptism remains an area of concern for some. We have come to our doctrinal position after careful study and prayer and feel that it is important to carefully lay out our position to anyone who has a question.

We feel that there are major questions to be answered:

1. What is the actual meaning of Christian baptism?
2. Who should be baptized?
3. What is the proper mode of baptism?
4. Who can baptize?

Obviously, baptism has been at the center of controversy for hundreds of years. The Christian Church today is divided in opinion and interpretation concerning baptism. Some consider it to be essential and necessary for salvation and others see baptism as symbolizing the completed and internal work of salvation in the life of the believer. There are other opinions all along the spectrum between these two views. The question behind all others is this: Does God perform the divine work of salvation in baptism or is baptism the response of the believer to the divine work of salvation that has already taken place?

### **1. What is the actual meaning of Christian baptism?**

There are a variety of beliefs concerning baptism within orthodox Christianity, however the presence of these conflicting views should not preclude a search for Biblical truth.



## **A Review of Prominent Positions:**

### **Baptism as a means of saving grace**

The classic Roman Catholic view is that Baptism actually moves a person from spiritual death to spiritual life. “By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as punishment for sin. In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam’s sin, nor personal sin nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God” (Roman Catholic Catechism, P 1263). Baptism is a sacrament (sacred or holy tradition) that imparts a sanctifying or saving grace and is a requirement for salvation, except in extraordinary circumstances. The normative practice of the church is infant baptism and faith is not necessary for the baptism to be effective, the act itself conveys God’s grace.

### **Baptism as a sign and/or a seal of the Covenant**

Many protestant denominations (including Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian Methodist and Reformed churches) practice infant baptisms. The belief that children of Christians should be baptized is primarily based on their understanding of baptism as covenant similar to that of circumcision in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign of entrance into the community of God’s people. It was administered to all Israelite children when they were eight days old. Similarly, those who practice this method of baptism, believe that baptism today is parallel to circumcision for the Old Testament saints. For New Testament christians, the outward sign of faith is baptism. Therefore, they believe that like circumcision, baptism should be performed on all infants in the church community. Presbyterian view of baptism differs from that of the Catholics because it is tied into the concept of a covenant relationship between God and man, or God’s promise to set apart people for himself. In this view, baptism is a sacrament that is a sign or a seal of God’s grace. However, their view of sacraments differ from that of the Catholic Church; a sacrament is a visible sign of God’s inward and invisible working in man through the Holy Spirit. They are the signs and seals of God’s covenant relationship.

Therefore, baptism itself does not have an inherent value; it is an outward sign of the inner faith. The Reformed view sees baptism as an act of faith that brings the believer into the covenant, not unlike circumcision in the Old Testament. The covenant made with Abraham continues today. The covenant was for all of Israel and included children, so the Reformed churches also baptize infants into the covenant relationship even though salvation may or may not follow. The sign of the covenant relationship in the Old Testament was circumcision and the sign in the New Testament is baptism.

All new believers are to be baptized along with all children of believing parents; all are to be brought into the covenant relationship. They believe Christ substituted baptism for



circumcision; therefore baptism is the new sign of the new covenant between God and believers in Christ.

### **Baptism as essential to salvation**

There are a variety of denominations that see baptism as necessary to obtain salvation. Churches of Christ hold that baptism is essential and necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is a required sign of a person's faith. Oneness Pentecostal churches also require baptism as part of the repentance of a new believer. Because they are tied together, baptism is essential.

### **Baptism as symbol of salvation**

Lastly, the "baptistic" view holds that baptism, as an outward symbol of the inward change, is administered to those who give a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is an ordinance (rite or ceremony) commanded by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20. The act of baptism itself does not produce any spiritual change; rather, it displays a believer's salvation and marks a mutual commitment between the church community and this new follower of Christ. In contrast to the views above, this position differs in that it is reserved for only those who have profess faith in Christ and have committed to walk in the community of the faith.

## **2. Who should be baptized?**

Salvation is found through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Ephesians 2:8 is clear: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." We are saved by His grace and any other requirement for our salvation is a perversion of the Gospel message and must be rejected.

Baptism, therefore, is a ceremony reserved for those who have already become believers by consciously putting their trust in Christ. The New Testament portrays a personal faith in Christ on the part of those being baptized. In Matthew 28, Jesus' command to baptize follows the command to make disciples. At Pentecost, Peter calls for repentance followed by baptism (Acts 2). It is a definite pattern that belief preceded baptism throughout the events of Acts (chapters 8, 12, and 19).

A careful reading of some seemingly problematic texts, Mark 16:16, John 3:5, Acts 2:38, Colossians, 2:12, and 1 Peter 3:21 does not change the basic meaning of baptism. Unlike repentance and conversion, baptism is clearly not a requirement of salvation. It is an act of faith and a public testimony that a believer has identified with Christ. It is a physical symbol of what has happened on a spiritual level in the believer

As we emphasized above, the Bible is clear that a believer's baptism is the correct position. As demonstrated in the book of Acts, those baptized in the early church were



believers and not seeking to be saved or infants. There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that infants were ever baptized, even in “whole household” baptisms. It is clear in the New Testament that the Gospel is heard, believed, and accepted prior to any baptism. (Acts 2:41, 8:12, 8:38, 9:18, 18:8) This excludes infant baptism as well as baptism as a precursor to salvation. Because the New Testament meaning of baptism demonstrates that a person believe first and then be baptized, there is no tenable, rational explanation to reverse the order.

### 3. What is the proper mode of baptism?

Sprinkling, pouring or immersion? The debate has raged for centuries. While it is not possible to fully resolve the issue of the proper mode of baptism on the basis of the study of the Greek, the predominate meaning of *baptizo* is to dip or to plunge under water (immersion). A reading of the texts dictates that those being baptized first went down into the water and then came up out of it. Mark 1:9 So it does seem that immersion was the mode consistently used in the New Testament.

We could potentially ask: Should this early practice in the New Testament be authoritative for us, or are we free to use whatever method we choose? Yet if immersion was the mode used in the New Testament and if we really view baptism as a symbol, as an ordinance, are we free to change the mode? We believe that God honors our obedience to the principles and patterns as they are clearly stated in Scripture. Immersion appears to be the most Biblically proper form of baptism. While we agree that it may not be the only valid form, the act of immersion seems to best symbolize the meaning of baptism.

Paul states in Romans 6:3, “*Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection.*” It would seem that Paul is making a case for the connection between the method of baptism and what it symbolizes. There is the death and burial to sin and resurrection to the new life in Christ.

### 4. Who can baptize?

After careful study and prayer, we have decided to have a pastor/elder lead all baptisms that take place in a gathered worship setting. We acknowledge that there is no prescriptive teaching on who can baptize in the New Testament. However, we have chosen to take this position for the following reasons:

Authority - Grace Church practices baptism in the context of our gathered worship services. Every component of the service is done under the authority and direction of



the leadership of the church. When baptizing someone, the baptizer is "proclaiming" that the baptizee has decided to follow Jesus and is bringing them into the fellowship of the church. We believe this is an authoritative act. Therefore, pastors/elders need to be leading in performing this ordinance. This seems to be the descriptive norm in the New Testament as someone with church authority is always performing the baptisms (elder, apostle, disciple, deacon, etc.).

Identity not Intimacy - Baptism is about identifying with Christ and his church. Although we desire for it to be a special moment/experience, the goal of baptism should always be obedience to the biblical mandate of identifying with Christ. There are instances where baptism may be intimate and times where it may not be. Our former method was becoming too focused on the individual and not on exalting Christ.

In Acts 2, thousands were coming to faith and getting baptized. Many of these new converts had no prior relationship with the apostles and church leaders that were baptizing them.

The "how" of baptism is a structural doctrine/belief, meaning it is a position that makes us unique from other Christian churches. All across the Upstate (and around the world) protestant churches view the "how" of baptism very differently. We do not negate or delegitimize the way other churches practice baptism, or the way we formerly practiced baptism. However, because of the reasons mentioned above, we believe moving forward this is the best mode of baptism for Grace Church. With this said, we do encourage a parent, family member or person of significance to enter the pool and participate in the baptism along with the pastor/elder.

## **Summary**

We have attempted to clearly and fairly state our position on baptism even as we acknowledge that there are many different interpretations. We do feel that we are adhering to the correct Biblical interpretation, and based on what we see as the clear teaching of Scripture, we strongly encourage our members to conform to our Structural Doctrine. We have not, however, made this a requirement for membership, acknowledging that different conclusions can be reached.

Therefore, we would ask each person to search the Scriptures and his own heart and to seek to understand the will of God concerning their own baptism. This is largely an obedience issue that must be addressed on the heart level. It appears clear that we are called to be baptized as believers, as a sign of our obedience. It stands as our outward testimony that we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. It is our public testimony to the grace Christ has bestowed upon us.

## **Grace Church Pastoral Staff**