

## Why Baptism Is a Necessary Next Step for Christians

<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/why-baptism-is-a-necessary-next-step-for-Christians.html>

Is baptism just a symbol—or something far more personal and powerful? This deep dive explores why baptism isn't just a ritual, but a life-defining pledge of allegiance to Christ that marks the beginning of walking in newness of life. If you've ever wondered why baptism matters, this article will help you see it as more than water—it's a declaration of identity and a call to live changed.

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I have been baptized twice in my life. First, I was baptized as an infant in a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. Second, as a believer in a church that required believers' baptism to teach and lead a small group. I freely admit that I didn't see the point of the second baptism. For me, it was a pragmatic decision rather than a theological conviction. I wanted to lead a small group and get more involved in my local church; the church required baptism, so I got baptized.

Though I wouldn't commend my "pragmatic" choice to other Christians, it forced me to think more deeply about baptism. As I reflected on baptism, I began to see that baptism is both necessary and significant. I'd like to think that few Christians would disagree with that claim, though agreeing with it doesn't necessarily mean we understand why baptism is necessary and significant. Baptism is a complex topic, with both scholars and practitioners disagreeing on how to interpret key biblical texts and how to define its sacramental role. There are some aspects of baptism that are quite clear.

### Baptism and the Commitment to Live Differently

In Matthew 3:7, when John is calling Israel to repent and baptizing people "with water for repentance" (3:11), the Pharisees and Sadducees come to be baptized. Rather than welcoming them, John rebukes them. His rebuke should not suggest that repentance was being withheld from the Pharisees and Sadducees. Instead, the text seems to suggest that the Pharisees and Sadducees were not prepared to repent in a once-for-all manner—a commitment to surrender one's old way of life and to embrace another.

John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that they should “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). He reinforces this idea in 3:10, noting that if they are not bearing “good fruit,” they will be “cut down and thrown into the fire.” John’s baptism reflected a commitment that would be evident in one’s way of life. The reference to heritage in John’s rebuke reinforces the emphasis on life change (3:9). One could not simply assume that being Jewish was sufficient to avoid the “winnowing fork” (3:12) of the one who will “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:11). The “vipers”—the Pharisees and Sadducees—were, in John’s judgment, not seeking true repentance and were not worthy of escaping the coming judgment (3:7).

In contrast to the Pharisees and Sadducees whose character—as evidenced by their behavior—made them unworthy of John’s baptism, Jesus, in John’s estimation, does not need John’s baptism (3:14). John’s assessment is proven out by the Spirit of God’s descent and the words spoken by the voice from heaven: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:16-17). These words designate Jesus as the one who will establish God’s kingdom by remaining loyal to the Father’s will. **Jesus’s baptism identifies him with the people even as it separates him from them. He is not baptized because he needs to repent. Instead, his baptism points the people to Jesus—following the beloved Son is now the new way of living to which the repentant turn.**

While water baptism after Jesus’s resurrection takes on the fullness of a specifically Christian theology (cf. Rom 6:4-5), both John’s baptism and Christian baptism reflect public pledges of allegiance to the Triune God. The inclusion of baptism in the Great Commission underscores this idea, as well as connecting baptism with teaching. In Matthew 28:18-20, we see that Jesus has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (28:18). Making disciples is the logical consequence of Jesus’s new authority. **Discipleship, then, is about drawing others under the authority of Christ. Making disciples, as Jesus articulates it here, involves two activities: baptism and teaching. Baptism was the initial pledge of loyalty to the Triune God—a commitment to represent God and his name well (28:19). Teaching involved learning to walk in the way of Jesus (28:20).**

In the Great Commission, we see that baptism is once again tied to walking in a new way of life. Learning to follow Christ is distinct from baptism, but cannot be isolated from it. To learn the way of Jesus requires more than purchasing a few books, attending a small group or Sunday school class, or even serving in a local congregation. While these activities can help an individual understand what it means to live under the authority of Christ, a commitment is still required. That commitment is baptism.

### Baptism as Pledge and Commitment

One of the more challenging passages on baptism is found in 1 Peter. In addition to the rather enigmatic reference to the “spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:18), Peter writes, “Baptism, which corresponds to this [the deliverance of Noah’s family through the waters of the flood], now saves

you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (3:21). At first glance, this text appears to be suggesting that baptism saves. That is a bit of a problem, given the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Is Peter really suggesting that anyone who happens to be baptized will be saved? Is he saying that baptism confers salvation? Not at all.

The key to understanding the passage is to recognize the qualifiers Peter adds to his baptism that saves. First, it is not a simple act of immersion. Peter is clear that external cleansing is not in view (3:21). The water of baptism is not efficacious in and of itself. Rather, the outward sign points to an inward reality in a way similar to circumcision. External circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel, but that external circumcision was to point toward the need for a circumcision of one's heart—a consecration of one's whole self to the Lord (Jer 4:4).

Second, baptism saves "as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (3:21). This word translated "appeal" is likely associated with the making of a covenant or contract—our pledge to bind our lives to the Triune God and to live under the authority of Christ. To play off of James's identification of the sort of faith that saves (Jam 2:14-26), we might say that "saving baptism" must involve a sincere pledge on behalf of the one being baptized.

**Baptism is necessary because it commits us.** Think of it in terms of marriage. Christians don't believe that the activities of marriage (i.e., moving in together, getting joint bank accounts, having sex, raising children) constitute marriage apart from a covenantal ceremony—a commitment made before God and others to love one another as a symbol of Christ and the church. The commitment is distinct from the activities, but it is not separable from the activities. Baptism may be understood in a similar fashion. **It is the ceremonial commitment through which one's allegiance to Christ is pronounced publicly.**

This notion of commitment—a pledge to be loyal to Christ—is also underscored in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The church in Corinth had begun to splinter due to preferences for one teacher or another. As Paul asks, "What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" In this final question, we begin to see the connection between baptism and the pledge of commitment one makes to follow Christ. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that they did not pledge their allegiance to some specific teacher at baptism, but to the Triune God. In doing so, they not only united themselves to Christ but to one another. The quarreling in the community was incommensurate with the pledge they made in baptism.

**Baptism provides a reference point for one's ongoing behavior.** We can either act in accordance with our commitment by obeying God or neglect our commitment by disobeying him (cf. Deut

30:19-20). Having pledged our allegiance to God, we repent—turn away from our old way of life and toward another. Through baptism, we are buried with Christ “into his death” (Rom 6:3). Baptism draws us into solidarity with Christ through his death—we share in his death at least in the sense that, in baptism, we commit to surrendering our old way of life in slavery to sin (Rom 6:11-14; 16-17). We are baptized “in order that” we may identify with Christ in another way as well—death comes before resurrection. In the near term, we are baptized “in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (6:4). Our pledge at baptism opens the way for a life reflective of Christ’s victory over death. In the longer term, “we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5).

This brief treatment of baptism only scratches the surface of all the various conversations that might be had concerning baptism. The focus has been on the necessity and significance of baptism as a pledge of allegiance given to Christ before others, that is to mark the beginning (though not necessarily the first act) of one’s commitment to Christ. While baptism can often seem like a “second thought,” baptism is no mere symbol. Instead, it is a ceremonial commitment whereby we agree that (1) the Triune God has a claim on our lives and (2) we will live in light of that claim.