

Position on Baptism at Oviedo City Church:
Our Understanding of the Meaning and Method of Baptism

What Is Baptism?

On the most basic level, baptism is what we call a sacrament of the church. “Sacrament” is defined in the *Lexham Dictionary of Theology* as “ritual actions undertaken by the Christian Church that are understood as visible signs of invisible divine grace.” The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word *mysterion*.

All of this does not mean that a sacrament is something we cannot understand. The Greek usage of the word is just the opposite. It means something that we did *not* know before has now been revealed. We see an example of this in Romans 11:25. Paul writes: “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” Paul is saying to the Romans that he wants them to be aware of something that God is revealing to them that was previously hidden.

Our definition of the sacraments also includes the idea that something spiritual is taking place in the action. In some way, this outward action signifies that God’s grace is engaged and being made known.

Theologians also speak of sacraments in general—and baptism in particular—as being not only signs, but seals. Not a seal in the sense of locking something in, but in the sense of a notary seal on a contract, or the seal of a king on a proclamation to his people. In the case of baptism, it is a seal on the covenant that God has made between himself and his people. It is a visible acknowledgement of God’s promise to fulfill his part of the covenant and a reminder to us to fulfill ours.

All of this comes to us because of the grace of God. The sacraments themselves are gifts from God designed to strengthen us by his grace. More than simple rituals of public professions of faith, they also have a spiritual ability to strengthen that faith and draw us closer to God.

So, what is baptism? It is a sign and seal of the New Covenant that God has made with his people through Jesus Christ. It marks the baptized person as being part of the covenant family that we call the church. When properly understood, baptism also becomes an aid to faith, assuring and reminding the person that they are part of God’s visible church.

What Baptism Is Not

There have been many misunderstandings surrounding baptism. Countless debates have been waged, particularly since the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

One such misunderstanding is that baptism washes away original sin and purifies the person being baptized simply by the carrying out of the ritual. In the Roman Catholic Church, this is especially prevalent. The phrase used to describe this is *ex opere operato*. It means “by the operation being operated” or, more simply, “by the deed being done.” In other words, baptism in this context carries with it a near magical ability to wash someone clean and grant them eternal life in the moment. Personal faith is not a necessary factor. This is especially important in the baptizing of infants in Roman Catholicism.

This is not the only misunderstanding of this kind. There are a handful of Protestant denominations and groups that insist on baptism as a requirement for salvation. They would argue that even if a person has expressed a genuine faith in Christ, if they are not baptized, they are not saved.

Both of these misunderstandings of baptism make the mistake of seeing baptism as a requirement for salvation and miss that it is a sign of the covenant. In order to understand what we mean by “a sign of the covenant,” we need to look at the beginning of God’s covenant with his people through Abraham and the sign of the covenant that was given to Abraham and his descendants.

How Does Baptism Relate to the Old Testament?

The Meaning of Circumcision

When God called Abram to leave his country and home, he promised Abram that he would bless him and all his descendants.

Genesis 12:1-3 reads:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

In chapter 15 of Genesis, God repeats his promise and expands upon it. In chapter 17, God repeats it again, this time adding a sign and seal to the covenant. He commands Abram, now known as Abraham, to be circumcised along with all the male members of his household. This includes every male of every age, both blood relatives and those who are servants in Abraham’s household. God further commands that every male born into the family from that point on be circumcised at 8 days old.

As we consider God’s commands to Abraham, there are two things we should note. First, God’s command to circumcise 8-day old males tells us that an expression of faith is *not* a requirement for the person receiving the sign of the covenant. The faith being expressed is that of one or both parents who are promising to raise their child in the covenant family so that the child may one day proclaim the faith as his own. The second

thing to notice is that Ishmael, who was not the son of the promise, was alive at the time and of an age where he could express or deny his own faith. Even though he was not counted as a believer in God, because he was in Abraham's household, he was also circumcised at this time, receiving the sign of the covenant.

This helps us understand that receiving the sign of the covenant is not a statement of saving faith on the part of the recipient. Rather, it is a sign that the person is part of a community of people who are in covenant with God.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God deals with his covenant people as a collective. They are all in it together, for good or ill. Their individual personal faith is certainly called for, but it is not the indicator of being part of the covenant.

When we get to the prophet Jeremiah, God promises that there will be a New Covenant coming. At that point, it is the heart that will be circumcised.

Jeremiah 31:33 reads:

*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their **hearts**. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

Clearly, this is not a call for an actual physical procedure on the heart; rather, it symbolizes something new that God is going to do with his covenant people.

The New Testament Connection between Circumcision and Baptism

By the time we get to the New Testament, Jews have been living with circumcision as the sign of the covenant for two millennia. When Paul, a man raised as the strictest of Jews, comes to faith in Christ, he learns from the Lord that the sign of the covenant has changed. It is no longer circumcision, but baptism. He makes this explicit in Colossians 2:11-12:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Paul was not the first New Testament apostle to make this connection. In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, Peter stands up before a crowd of thousands of Jews and preaches the gospel. In response to their question about being saved, Peter directs them to put their trust in Christ, and as a sign of that trust, to be baptized. Then he says: "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39).

In order to fully understand what is going on here, we need to understand the historical context. This is a crowd of religious Jews. They are in Jerusalem for one of the three major Jewish religious feasts. Some of them have traveled from as far as Rome to show

their devotion to Yahweh. For generation upon generation, they have been clinging to the promise given to Abraham and indicated to them by the sign of circumcision. Now Peter is telling them that there is a New Covenant that God has made through Jesus Christ. He is telling them that they can be recipients of that promise, the sign of which is to be baptized.

So far, what we have seen is that:

1. Circumcision was the sign of someone being in the covenant people of the Old Testament.
2. Circumcision was not an indicator of the personal faith of the one receiving the sign of the covenant, although if you had that personal faith, you were expected to be circumcised.
3. Children received the sign of the covenant based on the faith of the parent. It signified that those children were included in the covenant family and treated as full members.
4. In the New Testament, God makes a New Covenant with his people and the sign of that covenant is baptism. Baptism replaces circumcision.

Baptism in the New Testament

Now that we have seen that baptism replaces circumcision, we need to understand what baptism was all about in the New Testament.

John the Baptist

First, we need to distinguish John the Baptist's activities from Christian baptism. John was a Jewish prophet who was the forerunner of Jesus. His role was to declare that the Messiah was coming and that people needed to prepare their hearts to receive him. John called people to be baptized as a sign of their repentance and readiness to receive the Messiah.

It must be noted that these people were being baptized before ever realizing that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, John was well into his ministry and had baptized numerous people before Jesus' ministry even began. John's act of baptism was not baptizing people into a saving faith in Jesus Christ. It was a Jewish ritual that was actually very common in that day. People would get baptized, not as a sign of coming to faith in God, but as a sign of repenting, turning away from their sin, and once again living faithfully before Yahweh.

Jesus and the Great Commission

When Jesus commanded that his followers go and make disciples, he included the command to baptize them in his name—as well as that of the Father and Holy Spirit—as a sign of the New Covenant. This would be the sign that they were included in God’s family. Again, it was not a guarantee that such persons actually had a saving faith; they may or may not have been sincere believers. What was true is that they would be treated as members of the covenant family until they proved otherwise.

Baptism by Household

The baptizing of children becomes more clear in the book of Acts. There are a dozen times when people are baptized in Acts. On three occasions, we are told that entire households were baptized: the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 and the households of Lydia and then the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. In all three cases, the Greek word *oikos* is translated “household.” The word, by definition, means *everyone* who was part of the household. This includes men, women, children, servants, slaves, and even infants.

Understood in their historical context, these three passages point clearly in the direction of children being baptized as part of the household. It is improbable that three large households in the first century would have been made up of adults only—those at an age of reasonable accountability and a personal understanding of the gospel.

This practice echoes God’s commandment to Abraham under the Old Covenant. Abraham’s entire household was to receive the sign of the covenant. Now, in the New Testament, entire households were receiving the sign of the covenant. This would have seemed perfectly reasonable in a culture in which the family, including the extended household, was the center of identity and life. This stands in stark contrast to Western culture and philosophy in the last few centuries, where the emphasis on the individual has nearly excluded one’s identity as being part of a family.

The Context on Pentecost

We have seen how baptism replaces circumcision and are making the case that this included the children of believers, just as circumcision did. The objection that is often raised is that nowhere in the New Testament are we explicitly told to baptize children.

At first, this seems to be a serious objection. It is a fact that we are never commanded to give children the sign of the New Covenant. But the reality is, if children had been receiving that sign for more than 2,000 years under the Old Covenant and they were no longer supposed to under the New, shouldn’t that have been stated loud and clear?

Leaving aside the implication that household baptism would have included children, let’s assume for a moment (unlikely as it is) that there were no children in the households described in Acts 10 and 16. There is still a major issue with the Day of Pentecost in

Acts 2. When we understand the historical context of what happened on Pentecost, we see that if children were *not* supposed to receive the sign of the covenant, this would have been the time to say so.

Picture yourself as a first-century Jewish parent. You are devoted to your faith, and as a result, you have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Pentecost. You have traveled for weeks, all the way from Rome, with your family. As a faithful Jew, you are committed to God's covenant. All the male members of your family have been circumcised as a sign of the covenant promise, a practice your ancestors have faithfully carried out for 2,000 years, all the way back to Abraham.

On this day, you hear the disciples of Jesus preaching in the native tongues of everyone who is present. You hear the gospel and come to believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Along with a few thousand others, you put your faith in him.

You have heard Peter say,

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (Acts 2:38-39)

What do you make of that? Your assumption is going to be that your children also receive the sign of the covenant, as has been practiced for centuries.

It is at this point that opponents of infant baptism need to explain why Peter did not say, “There is a slight change. Your children should *not* receive the sign of the covenant until they are old enough to express their own faith and repent.” Such a change in a 2,000-year-old practice should have been declared at this point. The fact that it wasn't lends massive weight to the argument that the early church gave the sign of the covenant to the children of believers.

John Calvin put it this way: “... if the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews.”

Similarly, theologian R.C. Sproul wrote in his book on baptism: “It seems that infant baptism was administered because it represented a continuation of the practice that had more than two thousand years of precedent in the house of Israel.”

Wasn't Infant Baptism Something Added by the Church Centuries After the New Testament?

A further argument is that since infant baptism was not commanded in the New Testament, the apostles would not have practiced it and it must have been added in by the church at a later date—some say not until the third or fourth century.

The objection that infant baptism was added by the church long after the New Testament was written is simply not supported by historical evidence. In fact, the evidence points very clearly to infant baptism being a continuation of what the apostles and early church practiced.

The earliest reference we have in the writings of the early church comes from Irenaeus, who in A.D. 189 indicated that the Christian faith is notably for old men and children, but even for infants.

We find more direct statements a bit later from two other early church fathers. Hippolytus, who wrote in detail concerning worship practices in the early church, recorded this about the practice of baptism: “Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them” (The Apostolic Tradition 21:16, A.D. 215). This indicates a clear practice of baptizing infants who cannot express a faith but are represented in the covenant by a parent.

There is a direct connection by Origen in A.D. 248 that the practice was handed down from the apostles. He wrote: “The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of the divine sacraments, knew there are in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit” (*Commentaries on Romans 5:9*, A.D. 248).

It needs to be clearly stated that baptizing infants was the practice of the church from the days of the apostles and was the practice of the overwhelming majority of churches around the world until recent times. In the evangelical world, the scales have clearly shifted so that many people do not practice covenant baptism any longer. Yet the biblical and historical arguments for the practice remain.

What About the Dedication of Infants?

Many parents who have a genuine faith in Christ either come from traditions where infants are not baptized at all or have come to believe that baptism of infants is not biblical. In those cases, it is common for parents to have a ceremony of dedication of their children. When a child is dedicated, parents and members of the church pray for the child and make promises to disciple and raise them in faith so that one day, they will confess Christ and be baptized.

The same argument that “nowhere in the Bible are we told to baptize children” can be applied to dedications. Nowhere are we given a blanket command to perform a ceremony of dedication of our children. The Old Testament does call for the dedication of any male child who is the firstborn, but there is no command to dedicate any other children:

“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.” (Exodus 13:2)

“... you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD’s.” (Exodus 13:12)

The fact that there is not a command to dedicate children does not mean that it should not be done. It is a reasonable and understandable desire on the part of parents to want to bring their child before the Lord and promise to dedicate themselves to raising that child in the faith. This is what covenant promises are all about.

The Method of Baptism

The Meaning of Baptizo

The normal (though not exclusive) meaning of the words *baptizo* and *bapto*, from which we get *baptize*, is “to immerse.” This immersion is intended as a symbol of washing. In ancient usage among Greeks and Romans, it was a word group often associated with cleansing or bathing.

Contrary to popular opinion among many, however, *baptizo* and *bapto* do not exclusively mean “to immerse.” The most obvious place we see this is in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was believed to be made by a group of 70 rabbis around 200 years before Christ. The Septuagint is often represented by the Roman numeral for 70, LXX, indicating the 70 rabbis.

What is helpful is that we know the common meaning for the Hebrew words that get translated using *baptizo* and *bapto*. In passages such as Exodus 12:22, Leviticus 4:6, 17, Leviticus 9:9, Deuteronomy 33:24, and 2 Kings 8:15, we see the word group *baptizo* being used but the context and Hebrew words clearly exclude the possibility of immersion. Rather, they point to dipping, as in dipping your finger or bread into some liquid but not fully submerging it.

Why Is This Important?

An insistence on a methodology—any methodology—whether it is immersion, dipping, pouring, or sprinkling, will inevitably lead to questions that cannot be answered and border on the absurd. For instance, with immersion, how long does one hold the person underwater? Does it matter? Does the entire body need to be wet so that if they hold their nose and that does not get wet while immersed we have done something wrong? When we add the Trinitarian formula to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, do we hold the person underwater while saying that, or do we say it ahead of time? Do we immerse them three times?

While these may seem like ridiculous questions, they represent real debates and practices surrounding baptism in various traditions.

What About the Biblical Imagery of Dying and Rising in Christ?

The imagery of immersion is certainly powerful, and there is a uniqueness and power to baptism when immersion is practiced. However, that is not the only imagery the Bible uses to speak of baptism. There is also the idea of being washed, or cleansed, by the blood of Christ. Washing does not require immersion and can take other forms, like pouring.

What is important is not so much an adherence to a particular mode of baptism, but rather an understanding that baptism is a sign of the covenant that we have in Christ: we are made new, we are cleansed, and we are marked and sealed in our relationship with Christ.

The Practice at Oviedo City Church

In seeking to apply the best understanding of the full scope of Scripture and learn from the 2,000 years of church history that have come before us, OCC understands and engages in the sacrament of baptism and the dedication of infants as follows:

1. Baptism has its roots in the Old Testament covenant of circumcision and therefore it is right and appropriate for the believing parents of infant children to have their children baptized as a sign of the covenant. This does not mean such children are saved, any more than an adult being baptized as a sign of covenant faith is automatically saved by baptism. Rather, it is a sign of the existence of the covenant and a seal in the sense that God has placed it as his seal, his validation, that the covenant exists.
2. Believing parents who do not desire to have their child baptized are encouraged to present them at a ceremony of dedication in which the covenant promises will be affirmed for that child as they would for one being baptized.
3. It is the expectation that, as children of the covenant, all children at OCC will be taught the great articles of our faith in the hope that they will one day confess Christ as Lord. If they desire to be baptized at that point, whether previously baptized as a child or not, we will honor that desire in a baptismal service.
4. In the case of those who want to be repeatedly baptized due to their own doubts or another reason, we pastorally counsel that they not do so but rather rededicate themselves to Christ, finding assurance in his promises and not in repeated baptisms. The exception to this would be someone who was baptized as a child but desires to be baptized as a sign of his or her faith in Christ and a fulfillment of the promises made by their parents. In those cases, we are happy to celebrate with them at a public baptism.
5. While baptism by immersion will be the typical practice for those who are not infants, baptism by pouring or sprinkling is acceptable and may be necessary

depending on circumstances (for example, a conversion on the part of someone who is hospitalized and in the final stages of life).

6. Participation in baptism at OCC as a believing adult immediately establishes church membership. If the person has not yet participated in OCC's Know Grow Go membership class, we recommend this as a next step.

In all that we have said and all that we practice, we recognize that the meaning and mode of baptism have been debated for centuries within the Christian church. As a result, we approach this conversation with humility and a recognition that others can easily find fault with our thinking and practice. We hope that the same grace we extend to others over the nature of baptism will be returned. Our intent is to follow the commands of Jesus and the practice of Scripture as best we can, by the grace of God.

While we view baptism as being extremely important, it is not a first-level doctrine or article of faith. By that we mean: while important, it is possible to disagree on the nature and method of baptism and still be within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy and truth. In that regard, it differs from first-level doctrines such as the humanity and divinity of Christ, the Resurrection, Atonement, the Trinity, and salvation by faith alone. These are central and foundational to Christianity and, as such, *all* Christians have been united on these truths. Baptism, the nature of communion, when Jesus returns, and other similar doctrines are ones that we hold to be important but can disagree on, even within the same local congregation.