

BAPTISM: WHAT DOES RHC BELIEVE?

During his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ ordained two practices for his disciples to carry out: baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. Together with the right preaching of God's word, both ordinances give the church a distinctly gospel shape. When God's word is faithfully proclaimed, Christ is exalted and held out as the only Lord and Saviour. All who believe the gospel are baptised, which symbolizes their union with Christ by faith. The ordinance of baptism is the outward symbol of how our new life in Christ has begun through the gospel. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper is the sign of our ongoing union with Christ. By partaking of it, we show that we are living faithfully in the gospel, in continual fellowship with the body of Christ, the church.

The ordinances are not essential for salvation, but they are nonetheless important signs pointing to the reality of the gospel in our lives, both as individual followers of Christ and corporately as fellow members of his body. In other words, we are meant to display the gospel through our practice of the ordinances. This paper will examine what we, as Redemption Hill Church, believe and practice concerning the first of these ordinances, baptism. Part 1 outlines what we believe and practice. Part 2 surveys the biblical basis of our belief and practice.

Part 1: An Outline of Our Belief and Practice Concerning Baptism

RHC's Statement of Faith summarises what we believe concerning baptism:

"Water baptism (Matt. 3:6,11,13-16; Mark 1:5-9; Luke 3:16,21; John 1:26,33) is intended only for the individual who has received the saving benefits of Christ's atoning work and become his disciple (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:44-48; 16:14-15, 32-33; 1 Cor. 1:16; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; Gal. 3:27). Therefore, in obedience to Christ's command (Matt. 3:15; 28:19; Acts 2:38) and as a testimony to God, the Church, oneself, and the world, a believer should be immersed in water (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:5,10; John 3:23; Acts 8:36-39; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12) in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Water baptism is a visual demonstration (Rom. 6:3) of a person's union with Christ in the likeness of his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4-5). It signifies that his former way of life has been put to death, and vividly depicts a person's release from the mastery of sin (Rom. 6:6-11)." (Excerpted from RHC's Statement of Faith)

This paragraph answers several key questions about baptism:

1. What is baptism?

The Bible teaches that baptism signals the beginning of our Christian discipleship. Therefore followers of Jesus are to be baptised “***in obedience to Christ’s command***”.

It is “***a visual demonstration of a person’s union with Christ in the likeness of his death and resurrection***”. Baptism shows that we have been united to Christ through faith in him as our Lord and Saviour. And, just as Christ died and was raised, so in him we have also died to sin and have been raised to walk in newness of life. Baptism points to how, if we are in Christ, our “***former way of life has been put to death***” and we have been set free “***from the mastery of sin***”. Because we are in Christ, we have fellowship with the Triune God. Therefore baptism is Trinitarian, carried out “***in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit***”.

Baptism is a sign that testifies to the presence of God’s grace and saving faith. It does not create the reality of such grace or faith. It is also “***visual***”, in that baptism is meant to be a visible profession of faith in Christ. It is a “***testimony to...the Church***”, which means that it is carried out by the local church to affirm that the person being baptised has been united with Christ and his body.

2. Who should be baptised?

In light of what we hold Scripture to teach concerning the significance of baptism, it becomes clear that baptism is only for those who have believed in Christ. It is “***intended only for the individual who has received the saving benefits of Christ’s atoning work and become his disciple***”. Baptism therefore follows repentance and faith.

3. How should baptism be carried out?

We practice baptism by immersion, by which a believer is “***immersed in water***”. This is because “to immerse” is the most straightforward meaning of the Greek word *baptizo*. Immersion also best symbolizes the spiritual reality that we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. We are buried with Christ in baptism, and raised with him through faith (Col. 2:12).

Part 2: The Biblical Basis of Our Belief and Practice Concerning Baptism

This section focuses on three areas: (1) God's covenants with his people, culminating in the new covenant; (2) Christ's command to make disciples of all nations by baptising and teaching them; and (3) The connection between conversion and baptism.

1. Covenants

To understand the meaning and significance of baptism, it is helpful to begin with a survey of the biblical covenants and how they culminate in the new covenant. The covenants between God and his people form the backbone of Scripture. They structure the entire biblical storyline. The most prominent covenants are God's covenants with Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-3), Noah (Gen. 8:20-9:17), Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 22:15-18), the nation of Israel (Exodus 19-24), and David (2 Sam. 7:1-17).

Adam and Eve, who were created in God's image, were meant to glorify their Maker by living in a faithful, obedient covenant relationship with him. But they rebelled against God and fell into sin. Humanity's sinful state worsened, and God responded with the judgment of the flood. Yet God remained gracious—he promised that the woman's offspring would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). God also made a covenant with Noah in which he promised never to destroy the world with a flood again (Gen. 8:20-22).

However, mankind persisted in sinful rebellion against God. People sought to make a name for themselves, so God confused their language and scattered them over the earth (Genesis 11). But against this dark backdrop of human sin, God calls Abram (later named Abraham), promising to give him the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1; 13:14-18), to multiply his offspring (Gen. 12:2; 15:1-6; 17:4ff.), and to bless him and all nations in him and in his offspring (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:1; 22:18). God made a covenant with Abraham, which became the ground of all his future dealings with his people.

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. It reminded the people to walk blamelessly before God. In the progression of salvation history, circumcision served to mark out a physical seed and a male line to the Messiah, or Christ. In addition, circumcision was a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:11). Thus circumcision, the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, contained national, typological and spiritual realities.

God kept his promises to Abraham by rescuing his descendants from Egypt and bringing them to the Promised Land. God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19-24). This covenant constituted Israel as a nation (Exod. 19:5-6). It specified the means by which the people would continue to experience the blessings promised to Abraham. It promised blessings for obedience and also threatened curses, which would culminate in exile from the land, for disobedience (Deut. 28:1-68; 30:1-10).

In faithfulness to his word, God led Israel into the Promised Land. After the lawlessness of the period of the judges, God eventually established a king over his people. After deposing disobedient Saul, God enthroned David. He made a covenant with David, promising to build David a dynasty (2 Sam. 7:4-17). David's offspring would build a house for God's name and have his throne established forever. The glory of the kingdom reached its height under Solomon, David's son.

But, just as Adam and Eve sinned and were expelled from the garden, so Israel and Judah along with their kings turned away from God and went into exile. The problem was that the hearts of the people were sinful. They were "uncircumcised in heart" (Jer. 9:26). Yet God, in his mercy and steadfast love, did not forsake his people or his covenant promises. God promised to give his people what they truly needed—a new heart and new Spirit (Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 36:26). In creating his people anew, God would make a new covenant with them:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 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. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31-34)

Under the new covenant, God will transform his people from covenant breakers to faithful covenant people. He will write his law on their hearts. Because of this, all of God's people will "know the LORD", which means that they will worship him and obey his word. Each person's sin will be forgiven and remembered no more. What's new about the new covenant is not regeneration—Old Testament believers were regenerated by God; rather the newness consists of the fact that every member of the new covenant without exception will experience regeneration. Each and every member of the new covenant will personally know the Lord and enjoy the forgiveness of their sins.

The new covenant fulfills God's covenant with Abraham. How has this happened? In Galatians 3, Paul states that God's promises were made to Abraham and his offspring. Then he clarifies that "offspring" refers not to every physical descendant of Abraham but to a single offspring, "who is Christ" (v. 16). Thus the Abrahamic promises are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the promised offspring of Abraham. Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, lived in perfect obedience to God. In all of human history, he is the only one who rightfully deserved the covenant blessings. Yet Jesus went willingly to the cross, to die a death that was associated with being under God's curse. He did not die for his own sins, for he had none. Rather Jesus took on himself the judgment of a holy God against sinners, so that all who believe in him can be justified and forgiven. Galatians 3:13 says: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." By living the life that we should have lived and by dying the death that we should have died, Jesus has fulfilled the promises of the Abrahamic covenant. This is "so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (v. 14). Because of what Christ has accomplished by his life, death and resurrection, all who believe in Jesus—regardless of whether they are Jew or Gentile—are able to enjoy the blessings of the new covenant. Such blessings include: forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34), inward cleansing (Ezek. 36:25), resurrection (Ezek. 37:11-14), the gift of the Spirit (Ezek. 36:27; cf. Gal. 3:1-5, 14b – Paul says this outpouring of the Spirit is the blessing promised to Abraham in Genesis 12.) and incorporation into the people of God (Jer. 31:33; cf. Gal. 3:28). In other words, we are the seed of Abraham if we are in *the* seed of Abraham, that is, in Christ (Gal. 3:29).

We now turn to the New Testament to understand how baptism is the sign of the new covenant.

2. Command

Jesus Christ established the new covenant through his life, death and resurrection. He said in Luke 22:20, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." With these words, Jesus connected his death on the cross with the institution of the new covenant. He also ordained one of the signs of the new covenant, the Lord's Supper. Jesus thus commanded his followers to practice this new covenant sign "in remembrance of (him)" (v. 19).

Jesus instituted the other new covenant sign after his resurrection, which was his exaltation as King. Since all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ, his followers must therefore go and make disciples of all nations by "baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and teaching them to observe all that Christ commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). So the new covenant possesses two signs: baptism and the Lord's Supper. These signs should not be separated from each other and from the spiritual realities of the new covenant. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two ordinances that every faithful gospel-preaching church is commanded to practice.

Baptism signifies that one has become a disciple of Jesus Christ through repentance of sins and faith in him. If we are in Christ, we participate in the new covenant. Therefore baptism marks a person as belonging to the new covenant. In this sense, baptism is analogous to circumcision because both signs identify God's covenant people and mark them off from the world. But baptism does not exactly "replace" circumcision. This is because circumcision was given to every male belonging to the nation of Israel regardless of whether they were regenerate or not. Baptism, on the other hand, is given to every person who is in Christ, in whom the new covenant is fulfilled.

The Book of Acts testifies to how Jesus' followers obeyed his charge to make disciples of all nations. It traces the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to the end of the earth (1:8). The spread of the gospel follows a consistent pattern: people hear and respond to the gospel, they receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and they are then baptised (the Samaritans - 8:12; the Ethiopian eunuch - 8:36, 38; Saul - 9:18; 22:16; Gentiles - 10:47-48; 11:16-17; Lydia and her household - 16:15; the Philippian jailer and family - 16:33; the Corinthians - 18:8; and the disciples of John the Baptist - 19:3-7). Baptism is a public profession of repentance and faith.

In Acts, Luke shows how baptism is associated with the conversion-initiation experience of becoming a Christian. More specifically, baptism is associated with repentance (2:38; 11:15-18; 19:5-6), with faith in Christ (8:12-13; 10:43-48; 16:31-34; 18:8; 19:4-5), and with the gift of the Spirit (9:17-18; 11:17). Conversion in Acts is multi-faceted. In the experience of becoming a Christian, five integrally related components take place together: confession, repentance, faith, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, and baptism. This does not mean that baptism is necessary for salvation, but rather that baptism is closely associated with a person's conversion to Christ. Just because baptism is non-essential for salvation does not mean that it is unimportant. Peter's words in Acts 2:38 ("repent and be baptised") indicate that to hear the gospel and respond positively to it with repentance, but not be baptised, was unthinkable; the early Christians were baptised Christians.

3. Conversion & Union with Christ

Paul likewise closely links conversion with baptism. So in Romans 6, Paul can assume that the Christians in Rome (whom he has never personally met) have all been "baptised into Christ Jesus" (v. 3). Baptism is a sign that points to a believer's union with Christ, and therefore it identifies him or her with Christ's death and resurrection. To be baptised into Christ is to be "baptised into his death". And just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too are to "walk in newness of life". We also have the hope of future glory with Christ, for "we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (v. 5).

Baptism pictures death because submersion under water kills. The waters represent the flood of God's judgment on account of sin. Submersion under the water indicates that the person being baptised has experienced God's judgment in Christ. Therefore such a one has died to sin, and is given power by the Spirit to live a new life. Baptism by immersion best portrays this spiritual reality.

In Colossians 2, Paul makes an even more explicit connection between baptism and our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. He speaks of how a believer is "buried with (Christ) in baptism" and also "raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God" (v. 12). Baptism is the event in a Christian's life that indicates his or her initiation into Christ. It represents death to the old way of life and the birth of a new life. It is also worth noting that Paul does not only mention the objective nature of Christ's saving work. He adds that we must appropriate the salvation that Christ has accomplished "through faith". Once more, we see the connection between conversion and baptism.

In v. 11, Paul draws a connection between spiritual—not physical—circumcision and baptism. Believers have been "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands". This has taken place "by the circumcision of Christ". This, along with the phrase "putting off the body of the flesh" (cf. 1:22), probably refers to Christ's crucifixion. At his death, God cut off Christ's bodily life, just as the foreskin is removed in circumcision. The only circumcision believers need, then, is the circumcision they receive by virtue of their incorporation into Christ's death on the cross. Circumcision was meant to point to the death of Christ on behalf of his people. And so, when we are united with Christ, we undergo true circumcision—not of the flesh but of our hearts. The promise of the new covenant becomes a reality for us if we are in Christ. Therefore, given the parallel between spiritual circumcision and baptism, baptism is a new covenant sign that is given to all who have experienced the promised regeneration by God's Spirit.

Peter also associates baptism with conversion. In 1 Peter 3:21, he says "baptism... now saves you". At first glance, his words could be taken to support a sacramental view of baptism where saving grace is automatically conferred through baptism. But this is not what Peter means, for he immediately qualifies his statement by noting that the mere removal of dirt from the body does not save. Rather baptism is saving only if it accompanies conversion—"an appeal to God for a good conscience", whereby a person commits to God, seeking his mercy, grace and forgiveness in Christ. And it is God who saves "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ".

Baptism corresponds to the floodwaters of God's judgment (v. 20). Those submerged under water in baptism experience death, so to speak. Just as Noah and his family were "brought safely through water", so too believers in Christ emerge from the baptismal waters alive.

God saves us as individuals—each and every believer repents and believes in Christ. But while conversion is personal, it is not individualistic. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul says Christians are "all baptised into one body...and all were made to drink of one Spirit". Jesus immerses us in the Spirit, so that we are joined with the body of Christ, the church. Baptism, the receiving of the Spirit, and incorporation into the people of God are all connected. Baptism is a new covenant sign that points to how we have been united to Christ by faith. In Christ, we become partakers of the new covenant and belong to the people of God. Therefore baptism is not merely an ordinance for an individual but it brings an individual into gospel community. Baptism marks us out as members of God's people.

This is the reason why baptisms in Scripture are not self-administered but administered by other believers for the formation of the church (Acts 2:41). Local churches, which are given the charge to make disciples of all nations, have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel and to baptise those who come to faith in Christ into the membership of the church.

Conclusion

Baptism is a sign of the new covenant. All the spiritual realities that baptism symbolises are bound up with the new covenant: forgiveness, cleansing, resurrection, the gift of the Spirit and incorporation into the people of God. We enter into the new covenant through believing in Christ. Therefore baptism is only for those who have joined with Christ by faith. Baptism also signals our entry into the community of the new covenant, the church. The membership of the local church should therefore comprise baptised believers, those who have been regenerated and indwelt by God's Spirit (Eph. 2:22).

RHC therefore holds to and practices the baptism of believers only. We strive to proclaim Christ, and urge all who trust in him to be baptised in obedience to his command. Baptism is a public profession of our union with Christ by faith. It also symbolises how we have joined with the body of Christ, the church.

Further Reading

Sojourners & Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church, Gregg R. Allison

Baptism in the New Testament, G. R. Beasley-Murray

The Church: The Gospel Made Visible, Mark Dever

Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership, Bobby Jamieson

Infant Baptism & the Covenant of Grace, Paul K. Jewett

The Abrahamic Covenant in Reformed Baptist Perspective (article in *Themelios* 40.1, 2015), Martin Salter

Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright