

What Should I Teach My Child About Baptism?

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Bible concepts should be explained on a level that the hearer can comprehend. Jesus taught “as they were able to hear it” (Mark 4:33; cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20-22). Bible class teachers learn to communicate complex doctrines in age appropriate ways using simple concepts and words. As children mature, teachers and parents are able to build on that foundation with more detail and depth. This process continues throughout life as we continue studying and learning as God intends.¹

Baptism is not for children. Jesus taught that adults needed to become like little children rather than the other way around (Matthew 18:3). In our teaching, we must not make the mistake of rushing our children. They hear sermons on baptism that are designed to reach, in some cases, those resisting God’s command to be baptized. They sense that baptism is important to their parents, Bible teachers, and others they respect in the church. They may hear a statement like “you cannot go to heaven unless you are baptized.” As we generally mean it, this is true—no normal adult living today can go to heaven without baptism (1 Peter 3:21).

But there will be many in heaven who were not baptized. All the Old Testament faithful will be in heaven though never baptized, since baptism for the remission of sins is a New Testament command. Billions, perhaps, of infants and young children have died before reaching accountability. They certainly will be in heaven (2 Samuel 12:23). Millions of mentally handicapped individuals will enjoy the ready grace of God without baptism.

So, parents please assure your young children that God loves

them and that they are in no danger of being lost. Be careful that you do not rob them of their childhood by forcing them to grow up too fast.

At the same time, we should talk to our children of our desire for them to grow up to be Christians. A vital step in that process will be the decision to be baptized. How can we get across elementary lessons about baptism?

Baptism is God's bathtub.

All children understand taking baths. After explaining that each person has an outside and an inside—a body and a soul (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Genesis 2:7; 1 Corinthians 4:16)—parents can say, “When you take a bath you clean your outside, but when you get older you will get dirty on the inside. Then God will want you to be baptized so He can clean you on the inside.”

For children that are a little older, use your family Bible time to add to this simple foundation by showing that the Bible teaches that sin makes us dirty (2 Peter 2:20-22) and that baptism cleanses us from sin. Saul of Tarsus was told, “And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). *Wash away* means “to wash fully, have remitted.” Saul’s sins were washed away—his soul cleaned—when he was baptized in “God’s bathtub.”

Take time to explain that the baptistery is not filled with “magic water.” The power is not in the water; the power is in Jesus’ blood. In baptism God applies His Son’s blood to our soul’s sins. We cannot see or feel it happening, but we trust that God keeps His promise to make us “white as snow” on the inside (Isaiah 1:18). Marshall Keeble³ used to explain that the power is in the blood by comparing the water of baptism with the water in a clothes washer. Water alone will not clean clothes, but when detergent is added to the water then the

clothes come out clean.

Jesus' blood is God's detergent. God washes our sins in His Son's blood (Revelation 1:5). Since Jesus shed His blood in His death (John 19:34), and we are baptized into His death (Romans 6:3), it follows that we gain the benefits of His death in submission to baptism. We are sanctified and cleansed "with the washing of water by the Word" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

An Old Testament illustration makes this clearer for children. The leper Naaman went to God's prophet hoping to be cured (2 Kings 5). He was told to dip seven times in the River Jordan. He correctly assessed that the Jordan River had no magical powers and nearly wasted his opportunity. It was not the water but the power of God and his submission to God's authority that mattered. Just as Naaman was cured of leprosy when he obeyed God's command to go into the river (2 Kings 5:14), so a sinner is cleansed from his sins when he is baptized (Mark 16:16).

Baptism is when you get out of trouble with God.

Children understand about getting into trouble. They also know the joy of getting back in a parent's or a teacher's good graces.

God is angry with the wicked everyday (Psalm 7:11; Numbers 22:22), but His anger can be easily appeased by seeking His forgiveness. In the Christian age, that involves faith, penitence, confession, and baptism (Acts 2:38). God is not reluctant to forgive—He is eager to welcome the wayward back home (Luke 15:20-24). Micah wrote, "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy" (Micah 7:18).

An angry reader once marched into a newspaper office waving the day's paper, asking to see whoever wrote the obituaries. When referred to a young reporter, he stormed, "You can see I'm very much alive, and you've put me in the obituary column! I demand a retraction." The reporter replied, "I never retract a story. But I tell you what I'll do. I'll put you in the birth column and give you a fresh start." That's what baptism does for us—it gives us a fresh start. After we are baptized, God remembers our sins no more (Hebrews 8:12).

Baptism is when someone gets married to Jesus.

Most children have been to a wedding, or at least have seen the pictures on the wall of Mom and Dad's marriage ceremony.

Baptism is a believer's wedding ceremony. Paul wrote "concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32), picturing Christ as the bridegroom and the church as His bride (Ephesians 5:25-27). When we become a part of the church, then, we are in a sense getting married to Christ. We love Him and are making a commitment to Him "till death do us part." Actually, death will not part us as it is then that we will actually get to enjoy the wedding banquet (Revelation 19:9) and live happily ever after with Him (Revelation 21:4).

Teach the children well. One day they will teach your grandchildren what you have passed along to them (2 Timothy 2:2).

Endnotes

¹During a recent baptism I explained to the children in the audience what was taking place. This struck a chord with several who came with follow up questions after the service.

³1878-1968. Great evangelist in the churches of Christ who baptized tens of thousands. For a bio, see

