

What do we believe about ... **Baptism?**

Baptism
Christian Church joining grace
believer belonging
water infant
servant assurance
calling washing
commitment
cleansing faith transition
power task confidence
Spirit demand
cost



What do we believe about Baptism?

The essence of baptism

Baptism is a mark of joining and belonging, a visible sign of entry to the life of the Church. It involves water, although there is no fixed rule about how much. A person could be completely plunged into a baptismal pool or even in the sea (immersion), or have a little water dripped or smeared on their forehead (sprinkling), or something in-between (pouring).

Baptism always implies a commitment on the part of the person being baptised. But the act of baptism is done to us: someone immerses or sprinkles us, in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That's a sign of grace. While we bring our readiness to live the Christian life, the power and energy to make it possible come from outside us, from God.

There is no rule about the right point in a person's Christian journey for baptism to occur. The United Reformed Church recognises two different practices. Some people believe strongly

in infant baptism, for very young children – not because of anything the child believes at this stage in life, but because parents, Christian friends and the Church through the local congregation all





promise to bring the child up in the faith. The other practice is believer's baptism, when a person confesses Christian faith and commitment, and is baptised in recognition of this. A baptised believer would usually be an adult, although there is again no rule about the minimum age for this kind of baptism.

Baptism and Jesus

Jesus was baptised, by John the Baptist. Did he need to be? He certainly wanted this, to identify himself with the renewal movement which John had launched, and he himself would take forward. What did this baptism mean? This offers insight into our practice of baptism.

First, it meant **cleansing**. God was working in a fresh way, to offer people a new sense of pardon for their wandering from God's ways, and to call people into a new pattern of living.

John spoke of it as sorting out wheat and chaff, grain and husk (Luke 3:17). Baptism is a kind of washing away of the dust, chaff and husk of our living, so that God's good stuff can find its way into view.

Second, baptism meant **confidence**. When Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit touched his life in a new way. From then on, he

knew more deeply and truly that God was beside him and in him. Now the Spirit of God would breathe in and through him in greater

'It gives us work to do, and a purpose in living'

power. And for many Christians today baptism is a mark of assurance. It is a sign that God is involved personally with us.

Third, baptism also means **commitment**. Baptism names us as servants, of God, of God's kingdom, of our neighbour. It gives us work to do, and a purpose in living. We do not belong to ourselves, but to Jesus.

Fourth, baptism means **cost**. The words from heaven at Jesus' baptism, 'With you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11), come from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, where they refer to a strange figure called the Servant, who would bring God's light to the world through his own sorrow and pain. Baptism was drawing Jesus into that role, inviting him to try on for size the identity and calling of the Servant. So Jesus later used the term 'baptism' to speak of his own suffering, his immersion in the deep waters of pain and humiliation. For Jesus' followers too, experiences that strain and stretch us, that crumple and distress our spirits, may be used by God in ways we would not expect, to



bring life and hope to other people. Baptism is assurance. It is also calling, task and demand.

Baptism in the Church

After Jesus had left his friends, they baptised people in his name. One reason for doing so was that Jesus himself had

been baptised, another is that he commanded them to go into the world making disciples of all nations and baptising in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). In the church, baptism became a way of saying that a person's life was focused on Jesus. But it was not long – within a generation or so of Jesus' own time – that Christians were also

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thinking of baptism in terms of the link between the believer's life and the death and resurrection of Jesus. 'We were buried with him in his death, so as he was raised, we too might live a new life' (Romans 6:4).

At baptism there is a contact: Jesus' story becomes our story, and our living becomes his. There is a transition; an old pattern of life no longer claims us, and a new one begins.

'all one in Christ Jesus'
(Galatians 3:27-28)

Baptism, then, created community. Baptism brought people together, with no sense of rank or status. The world liked to

think in categories. Christians knew better. They were 'all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:27-28). Baptism was a great leveller, not because it cut people down, but because it raised them up, to share the life of Jesus together. It still does.





This is one in a series of booklets about the United Reformed Church. The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/believe



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