

Baptism is one of the two New Testament ordinances (sometimes called sacraments). It is the formal expression of a believer’s entry into a saving relationship with God through Christ (Acts 2:38–41; 1 Peter 3:21), and as such is a visible word: from the side of the person baptised, baptism is a visible and decisive expression of his or her repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 2:38–41; Romans 6:3–4); from God’s side, baptism is a sign of the baptised person’s union with Christ and remission of sins (Romans 6:3–4; Hebrews 10:22). It follows, therefore, that the only proper subjects of baptism are those who profess repentance and faith in Christ (Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 2:37–41; 8:12–13, 36–38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 11:16; 15:9; 16:14–15, 31–34; 18:8; 19:3–5; 22:16; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21). The due administration of this ordinance involves immersion in water.

(Sola 5 Confession 7.7)

The second of the Ten Commandments forbids manmade constructions as an aid to worship. This is because human beings cannot properly conceive of the living God, except inasmuch as he has revealed himself in Scripture. Nevertheless, knowing the human need to see, feel, taste, touch, and hear, God has given two sacraments to the new covenant church as visible signs of his covenant with his people. These two signs form the subject of Confessions 7.7 and 7.8.

The Confession begins with the simple affirmation that **baptism is one of the two New Testament ordinances (sometimes called sacraments)**. This immediately sets the Confession apart from Roman Catholicism, which recognises seven sacraments. Some Protestant churches hold to a third sacrament: foot washing. They do this because Jesus, after washing his disciples’ feet, told them to do the same. Do you think that this command creates space for a third sacrament? If not, why not? *While Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and told them to imitate him, it appears that he was not commanding foot washing per se but the attitude of being a servant to one another. This seems to be the case because we do not see foot washing being continued as a practice in either Acts or in early church history. We can contrast this with baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which were immediate and consistent practices of the church from the book of Acts onward.*

The Confession defines baptism as **the formal expression of a believer’s entry into a saving relationship with God through Christ**. How do the supplied texts (Acts 2:38–41; 1 Peter 3:21) support this affirmation? *The texts supplied tie conversion and baptism so closely together that a number of cults have actually taken these verses to teach baptismal regeneration. While the Bible does not teach baptismal regeneration, we must not miss the fact that baptism is here considered an integral part of a believer’s confession of Christ. In the same way that circumcision was the visible old covenant sign that someone claimed to be a part of God’s people, so baptism is the visible new covenant sign that someone claims to have entered into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To reject baptism is therefore, in a real sense, to reject the gospel by which a person claims to have been saved.*

Given this understanding of baptism as **the formal expression of a believer’s entry into a saving relationship with God through Christ**, what should we think about the practice of rebaptism? *Baptists are sometimes accused of rebaptising those who have already been baptised as infants. As we will see below, however, Baptists don’t recognise the “baptism” of infants as valid baptism. Baptists do not, therefore, practice rebaptism. Baptists believe that baptism is a once-off act by which a believer in Christ is immersed in water in the presence of witnesses as a testimony to his or her profession of faith in Christ. Those who have done this have been baptised, and there is no biblical warrant for a person to seek rebaptism because they have come to understand doctrine better, or baptism better, or have sensed a sudden significant growth in faith.*

Baptism is defined as **a visible word**. What do you think is meant by this phrase? *Baptism and Communion are sometimes referred to as “silent sermons.” That is, they are visible enactments of the gospel that is central when the word is preached.*

Baptism has two sides to it, according to the Confession: the baptismal candidate’s side and God’s side. We might argue that there is a third side: the church’s side. Read the supplied texts and comment briefly on the significance of baptism from the various sides.

From the side of the person baptised, baptism is a visible and decisive expression of his or her repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 2:38–41; Romans 6:3–4). *By requesting baptism, believers make a public declaration that they have been saved by the gospel and are committed to walking in newness of life. In the presence of witnesses, this is a call for the witnesses (ordinarily a local church) to hold the person accountable to walk in obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord. It is a profession that the former life they once lived is now buried, and they are committing to walk in consistent obedience to Christ.*

From God’s side, baptism is a sign of the baptised person’s union with Christ and remission of sins (Romans 6:3–4; Hebrews 10:22). *While God knows the heart, baptism is significant also from God’s perspective, in the same way that circumcision was significant from his perspective under the old covenant. In baptism, God bestows a special measure of grace upon the obedient Christian and, in a mysterious way, seals that person as belonging uniquely to him through the gospel. The baptismal water has no special power to cleanse a person’s sins, but God recognises significance in the act for those who have been cleansed from sin.*

What would be the significance of baptism from the church’s perspective? *In baptism, the church is witnessing a person who has professed faith in Christ making public his confession and commitment to walk in obedience. The church, as the custodian of the gospel, professes that it has evaluated the candidate’s understanding of the gospel and affirms that the person undergoing the sacrament has made a sound profession and there is evidence that the person is walking in obedience to Christ. It is important, therefore, that the church performing the baptism be a true church with a formal understanding of the gospel.*

Why does it follow, therefore, that the only proper subjects of baptism are those who profess repentance and faith in Christ? In what way do the supplied texts (Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 2:37–41; 8:12–13, 36–38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 11:16; 15:9; 16:14–15, 31–34; 18:8; 19:3–5; 22:16; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21) support this affirmation? *Since baptism is a sign of the believer’s identification with Christ, those who do not, in their own right, share that identification with Christ should not be baptised. The supplied texts support this in at least two ways: (1) The didactic texts consistently show that baptism follows a profession of faith or a command to believe in Christ; and (2) the narrative texts consistently show that those who have been baptised have made this profession.*

How do you answer those who suggest that, in household baptisms, there must have been infants who were baptised? *An argument from silence is not a strong argument. While many households have infants in them, it is equally true that many other households don’t have infants in them. We cannot assume that a household must have had infants in it and must rather therefore look at the clear instances of baptismal candidates in the New Testament to see whether or not there is an example of infant baptism.*

As a Baptist Confession of Faith, the Confession concludes that **the due administration of this ordinance involves immersion in water.** This is seen (1) in instances of baptism in the New Testament; (2) in the basic meaning of the Greek word for baptism (which means to immerse); and (3) in the practice of the earliest church, where immersion was the standard practice. Given this understanding, how do we think about those who have been baptised by sprinkling or pouring as adults having professed faith in Christ? *There is some disagreement among Reformed Baptists as to how to think about this. The conviction of the elders of BBC is that baptism is not valid unless it is performed by the complete immersion of a believing adult at his or her own request. Rare exceptions might take place in the event that a person physically cannot be lowered into the water, in which case pouring might be considered a suitable substitute.*

One final note is in order here for BBC’s practice in particular, which is again not a practice followed by all Reformed Baptist Churches. At BBC, we baptise people into membership. Since “in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13), we only baptise those who understand that, by baptism, they are entering into formal membership of the church, with all the attendant privileges and responsibilities attached to that. There is no formal minimum age limit for baptism or membership in the church. While there are Constitutional limitations on certain membership responsibilities (e.g. only members over the age of 16 can vote in members’ meetings), and while there may be certain ministerial restrictions based on age, there is no minimum limit for the purposes of baptism and church membership.