



Key Questions:

*What is Baptism and How Does it Work
at Leonardtown Baptist Church?*

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The point of this booklet is to help those who worship at Leonardtown Baptist Church to understand the process of baptism and what is expected of those who wish to profess their faith through baptism. After recent evaluation, the elders wish to offer a few modifications of what the standard practice of the church has been regarding baptism. These modifications are described herein.

In addition, any of our elders are always more than willing to discuss this face to face with anybody who attends Leonardtown Baptist Church. It is our fervent prayer and utmost desire that the Lord Jesus will be honored and glorified as we seek to encourage individuals to follow Him in believer's baptism.

Meaning of Baptism

The meaning and significance of baptism varies widely from one group to the next. At Leonardtown Baptist, we agree with the often-used phrase that baptism is "an outward sign of an inward reality." That reality is that one has trusted the atoning death of Jesus as payment for their sins and that through faith and trust in that atonement they've been born again and made a member of God's family. Baptism, then, is a visual testimony to this commitment to Jesus. It is an initial step of discipleship, a step of obedience to God's word. It should occur after one has placed their faith and trust in Jesus.

Mode of Baptism

As noted above, various groups have differing understandings of what baptism is and how it should occur. Some groups sprinkle just a little bit of water over the one being baptized whether it is an infant or an adult. Some groups pour water over a baptismal candidate's head. Still others, like Baptists, immerse an individual completely under the water.

The Greek word used consistently throughout the New Testament for baptism is the word ***baptidzo***. In fact, our word baptism is not a translation of that word, but rather a transliteration, which means that the Greek letters used have simply been turned into English letters. This also includes modifying the ending of the word. By doing so, ***baptidzo*** becomes baptize in the verbal form or baptism in the noun form. According to just about every Bible lexicon, the word ***baptidzo***

means to immerse or submerge. It is a word used to describe cleaning items by plunging them under the water. This is why Baptists practice baptism by immersion, rather than other modes.

At Leonardtown Baptist, there would need to be a very compelling reason for why an immersion couldn't occur before we would baptize an individual by some mode other than immersion. The elders would certainly consider using an alternate mode if extenuating circumstances exist that makes immersion impossible, but an individual simply having a personal preference to be sprinkled rather than immersed would not be sufficient.

Romans 6:4 is, perhaps, the clearest picture of immersion baptism. The Apostle Paul says, "Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life." When an individual is plunged under the water, it is a picture of their belief in the death and burial of Jesus. It is also a picture of the spiritual reality that they have turned from their old way of life and that person has been put to death and buried. When an individual who has been plunged under the water is then raised up, it is a picture of their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. It is also a picture that they have been made a new creation in Christ. They have been, as Paul put it, raised to "walk in newness of life."

Candidates for Baptism

Leonardtown Baptist practices believer's baptism. Often called credo-baptism, believer's baptism is distinct from paedobaptism, which is the baptism of infants. The age at which one can understand enough to believe and make a credible profession of faith varies from individual to individual. A helpful guide to knowing if an individual possesses a valid profession of faith is their ability to verbalize their faith in Jesus, expressing an understanding of sin, their separation from God because of that sin, and the significance of Jesus' death as a substitute for their sin. It's not necessary for an individual to know every theological intricacy of what the atonement is about, but they should at least have a basic understanding of its necessity.

Misunderstandings of Baptism

Baptism does not save anybody. Many people adopt a sacramental understanding of baptism, that is, that through participation in this religious ritual, grace is somehow transmitted to us and we receive salvation. This is similar to the misunderstanding that many Jews had in biblical times. They had circumcision, the sign of the old covenant. Because of this outward ritual, most Jews thought they were rightly related to God. Yet the New Testament makes it clear that an outward religious ritual is not what saves us. Paul said, “True circumcision is not something visible in the flesh...circumcision is of the heart – by the Spirit, not the letter” (Romans 2:28b, 29b).

In the same way, some people today see baptism as the New Testament equivalent of Old Testament circumcision. This is often true among paedobaptists, those who baptize infants. They reason that circumcision was the sign of the covenant and the means of entry into the covenant community among the Jews; thus, baptism is the sign of the new covenant and the means of entry into the church as God’s covenant community. But we need to make a distinction between the sign and the means of entry. In the old covenant, circumcision did serve as both; it was the sign of the covenant and the means of entry into it. But while baptism is, indeed, the sign of the new covenant, the means of entrance into that covenant is spiritual in nature (rebirth), not physical (baptism). One’s physical baptism simply pictures the spiritual reality that has already taken place, which is why believers are the only proper candidates for baptism.

Thus, we see that in the old covenant the sign of that covenant and the means of entry into it were one and the same – circumcision. But in the new covenant, the means of entry is spiritual in nature (rebirth) while the sign is physical in nature (baptism). The physical outward sign is simply an indication that the inward spiritual means of entry has occurred. Some have described baptism as washing away original sin and the means by which one is made perfectly clean before God. This is a deficient understanding. The main problem with such a view is that we sin again, usually soon after we’ve been baptized. Unless a person is baptized only moments before their death, it’s impossible not to sin subsequent to one’s baptism. The dying thief on the cross beside Jesus is an excellent example

that corrects this misunderstanding. This thief asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus didn't insist that he needed to be baptized, but rather He told him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Baptism then, while important, must be detached from salvation. It is not a vehicle of salvation nor a requirement to be saved. With that said, however, baptism is an important step that any who profess to be saved should undertake. In the same way that one born physically under the old covenant received the sign of that covenant (circumcision), so one born spiritually under the new covenant should receive the sign of that covenant (baptism).

The Public Nature of Baptism

Baptism is a public profession. Jesus called people to follow Him publicly, not privately. He said, "Everyone who will acknowledge me before others, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever denies me before others, I will also deny him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33).

In that regard, the elders will not do a "private baptism." From time to time, people make this request. They wish to gather a few friends and/or family members together, come to church privately, and be baptized. This perspective of baptism runs counter to what the New Testament describes. When Jesus was baptized, He came before John the Baptist in the Jordan River with many onlookers. It is, as stated above, an initial step of discipleship. One cannot be said to be a true disciple if they are unwilling to publicly identify with Jesus, who they claim to follow. Baptism is, by its very nature, a public activity whereby we profess our faith in the one in whose name we are baptized.

Process of Baptism

At Leonardtown Baptist, we ask that individuals who wish to be baptized schedule an interview with one of our elders. This is an important and non-negotiable step. At that interview, you will be asked to share your testimony of faith. The reasons for this are both simple and important. We want to ensure, as

much as possible, that individuals who enter into the waters of baptism, have a credible profession of faith. If you haven't truly trusted Jesus, or if you don't understand the significance of what His death means, then you are not ready to be baptized. The elder that you speak with will seek to gently guide you into an understanding of what salvation truly means.

This interview is not extensive. We are not looking for a detailed theological treatise. We are just looking for you to tell your story. When did you recognize that you were a sinner who needed Jesus? How did that occur in your life? Where were you and who all was involved? Why do you now want to follow Him in baptism? Questions like these will be asked to help guide the interview conversation.

If in the interview you share a credible profession of faith, we will then move on to preparation for baptism. It is preferred that baptismal candidates make a testimony video at this point to be shared with the congregation on the day they are baptized, *however, this is not an absolute requirement*. Should you wish to make the video, the elder will discuss that process with you at the baptism interview. However, you may wish to share your testimony live, rather than via video. That is certainly acceptable as well. The elder working with you will likely ask you to write it out so that he may review it prior to your baptism. This will enable him to offer helpful suggestions for making your testimony even more effective.

The elders do recognize that some people are not comfortable speaking in front of crowds, even via video. So, the elders are willing to work with people to use a series of questions that can be asked prior to the baptism to enable an individual to verbalize their profession of faith. These questions cover three critical areas of faith in Christ. They would enable an individual to admit before the congregation that they are a sinner. They would affirm their understanding that Jesus died on the cross for their sin. They would profess that they are trusting Him alone, that they believed He rose again from the dead, and that they believe there is salvation in no other name. The elders believe this is sufficient and are willing to work with individuals who feel unable to verbalize their faith journey through a video or live testimony.

Privileges of Baptism

The Baptist Faith and Message, the doctrinal statement of the Southern Baptist Convention, which LBC holds as its own, says of baptism, “Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper” (Article VII). Church membership is typically associated with baptism. This association is based on the pattern observed in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, when we read about people being baptized, we also typically read an associated statement like, “And there was added to the church that day...”.

Baptism has often been called the “door to church membership.” In the past, there have been a few instances where individuals have been baptized but not presented for church membership, but the typical pattern should be that baptism is associated with church membership. As was stated with baptismal mode in the “Mode of Baptism” section, there may be some limited cases where this typical pattern is not followed, but they are usually few and far between.

Author Bobby Jamieson puts it well when he says:

“If baptism is the front door of the church, then churches should, as a rule, only baptize people into church membership. There’s no ‘I’m with Jesus but not yet with the church’ stage. If you go public as Jesus’s disciples, you join his public people. And if a church baptizes people into membership, they say from the beginning that the Christian life is lived in the local church. You explode the myth of the lone-ranger Christian. You help ensure that ‘body of Christ’ and ‘family of God’ aren’t dead metaphors but living truths that help define what it means to follow Jesus ...” *(interview with Matt Smethurst at www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/is-baptism-required-church-membership).*

Also, as stated above, the Baptist Faith and Message states that baptism is prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper. When we observe the Lord’s Supper at Leonardtown Baptist, the elder leading will typically indicate that one should be an individual who has been baptized after they believed before they partake. In a booklet on communion, first published by the elders of LBC in June, 2018, we wrote:

“...theologically, the order of participation in these ordinances is significant. Baptism pictures entrance, and Communion pictures continuation. If one has not even entered into the kingdom, they cannot continue in it. Again, baptism doesn't cause us to enter the kingdom, but it does picture that we've entered it through faith. In the same way that baptism doesn't cause us to enter the kingdom, the Lord's Supper doesn't keep us in the kingdom. The power of God does that. Nobody will snatch us from the Father's hand, Jesus said. So, we don't maintain this order because our salvation is dependent upon it, but we maintain this order because it rightly pictures our salvation and how it is worked out in our lives.”

Baptism is a wonderful opportunity. It is an opportunity to profess our faith in a crucified and resurrected Savior. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that we desire to unite with His people, the church. And it is an opportunity to begin participating in the ongoing celebration He left with us to point us to His atonement – the Lord's Supper.

Conclusion

Baptism belongs to the children of God. The elders of Leonardtown Baptist Church desire baptism to be a positive and memorable experience for those who participate in it. And while sharing one's faith journey through a live or recorded testimony is an effective means of publicly professing that faith, it is certainly not the only way to do so. This is why the elders are willing to work with any baptismal candidate to help them prepare in a way that best enables them to publicly profess their faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ.

We, the elders of Leonardtown Baptist Church, are grateful for your interest in this subject, and are more than willing to meet with anybody who would wish to discuss this further for any needed clarification or for more information.

“You were also circumcised in him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” -Colossians 2:11-12