

Hillcrest
BAPTISM

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for expressing interest in baptism. Baptism is one of the highest privileges given to followers of Jesus. Baptism has been practised throughout Christian history and in virtually every Christian tradition.

The purpose of this booklet is to explore the roots and meaning of baptism, so that you can make an informed decision. This will ensure that your baptism has a clear and a rich meaning for you.

This booklet is designed for self-study. As you read through it, take the time to stop and answer the questions in each question box.

The fill-in-the-blank questions are based on the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible. However, please take the time to look up all of the Bible passages in your own Bible, even if it's a different version.

If you have trouble filling in the blanks because you're reading a different version, all of the passages are printed from the NIV in *Appendix D* (p. 25). Also, the answers to the fill-in-the-blank questions are at the end of this booklet (p.27).

If you wish to be baptized, we invite you to inform the church of your intent and arrange for a baptism interview. During that interview, we will review your understanding of baptism, and your personal testimony (see *Appendix A*, p.18).

If you have any questions during your self-study, feel free to contact a pastor or Christian friend who can help you.



BAPTISM

Baptism is one of two experiences that Jesus himself specifically told His followers to remember (the other being Communion – or the Lord’s Supper – when we share the bread and the cup in memory of Christ’s death). The vast majority of Christian churches, regardless of their specific denomination or tradition, continue to practice some form of baptism.

Today, two thousand years since Jesus walked this earth, a baptism ceremony can seem foreign, strange, even embarrassing. But it is meant to be a beautiful and personally meaningful celebration for you as a follower of Christ.

Baptism can be a significant spiritual experience. The purpose to this study is to unpack the rich meaning of baptism. As you work through this study, you will:

- Examine the Biblical roots of Christian baptism.
- Examine our specific practice of the baptism tradition.
- Learn what you need to do in order to be baptized by Hillcrest Church.



THE ROOTS OF BAPTISM

“**Baptism**” comes from the Greek word “*bapto*” meaning, “to cover or plunge in water, wash, dip, immerse.” *Bapto* also has a secondary meaning, which is “to identify, or be united with.”

We have many early examples of Christian baptism in the Bible, particularly in the book of Acts. For example, look up and read each of the following passages:

- Acts 2:37-41
- Acts 8:34-38
- Acts 16:29-33
- Acts 18:8

QUESTION:

How soon after receiving Christ are the believers in these passages baptized?

As far as we can tell from Scripture, the earliest Christians were baptized as soon as possible after they accepted Christ.



Baptism in the New Testament is connected to the Old Testament practices of cleansing and purification. The purity laws contained in the Old Testament pointed toward the spiritual cleansing that was to be brought about through Christ.

For the earliest Christians, baptism was very closely linked with salvation (i.e. someone's initial decision to follow Jesus). Baptism followed salvation so closely that some traditions have come to believe that baptism is the actual means by which someone is saved. We do not hold this position, since that would make baptism something you needed to "do" to save yourself. Ephesians 2:8-9 clearly states: "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.*" This excludes baptism as a "work" that saves you. Notice in Luke 23:39-43 that the thief on the cross had no time to be baptized, but was saved through faith in Jesus.

It appears that baptism was viewed by the early Christians as the *first overt act or demonstration of their faith* in Christ. Just like we might express our initial commitment to Christ by raising a hand, coming forward, praying a prayer, or filling out a card, so the first Christians expressed their desire to follow Jesus by being baptized.

As the message of salvation spread to new nations and cultures, the church began to delay baptizing new converts, sometimes for years. The legitimate advantage of this decision was that it gave time for teaching, and to ensure that those who were baptized clearly understood what they were doing. The unfortunate consequence of this delay, however, was that baptism became somewhat removed from its roots in salvation; and in certain contexts, lost some of its significance.

Therefore, the key to understanding baptism is found in understanding salvation and how baptism celebrates and symbolizes what Jesus has done for us.



WHAT HAPPENS AT SALVATION?

Read the following passages to see what the Bible says happens at salvation.

Ezekiel 36:25-27. What God will do for His people?

He will c_____ them with water (i.e., forgive them).

He will give them a new h_____ and put a new s_____ within (i.e., “new life”).

John 3:3-6. It’s possible that Jesus is referring back to Ezekiel 36:25-27, which you just read. *Ezekiel 36* tells us that ...

“Water” is a symbol of f_____.

“Spirit” is the agent of n_____ l_____.



Titus 3:5

We are saved by the ...

1. **W**_____ of rebirth.
2. **R**_____ by the Holy Spirit.

**To summarize:
The two main things that happen at salvation are...**

(1)
We are “washed clean”
(F_____).

(2)
We are given a “new heart & a new Spirit”
(N_____ L_____).



WHAT DOES BAPTISM SYMBOLIZE?

The first part of the puzzle is now in place. We have seen that two major aspects of our salvation are forgiveness (symbolized by washing or cleansing) and new life (described as “rebirth,” “a new heart,” “a new spirit,” etc.). What happened when you accepted Christ? Your sins were forgiven, and you were given a new spiritual life, powered by God’s Holy Spirit Himself.

Now that we have a grasp of what salvation is, let’s take a look at what **baptism** celebrates and symbolizes.

Read:

- **Acts 22:16**
- **1 Peter 3:18-22**

What do both these passages associate the water of baptism with?

The w_____ a _____ of sins.

We have already discovered how this washing away of sins took place when we accepted Jesus by faith. The Apostle Paul reminded Christians in 1 Corinthians 6:11: “*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*” Baptism symbolizes this work. The outward sign of an inward work. A work that is done by God Himself.

Baptism in water does not magically remove sin. It is “*not the removal of dirt from the body*” that saves you, “*but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.*” In other words, baptism demonstrates our new heart attitude. It expresses that we have come to God for “washing” (forgiveness). Salvation is not achieved through



the washing of our bodies, but through the washing of our hearts, having placed our faith in Jesus.

Because water in the Old Testament was a symbol of cleansing and forgiveness, the earliest Christians would have recognized that baptism expresses or symbolizes “the washing away of sins.”

Read:

- **Romans 6:1-7**
- **Colossians 2:12**

Baptism symbolizes our **d**_____ and **r**_____ with Christ.

It is a picture of what it means to be totally *immersed* into Christ and to be fully *identified* with Jesus (the second meaning of the word “baptize”; see p.5). Jesus is our source of life and victory. It is only in Him that we find freedom from sin.

Going under the water and rising again symbolizes our death and resurrection with Jesus. Dying to our old life (lived in our power, for our purposes and self-glory), and rising up again to newness of life (lived in Christ’s power, for His purposes and His glory). It is in Christ that we have a new relationship with God, a new identity, and a new spiritual vitality.

One of the rituals a person in Jesus’ day had to undergo to convert to Judaism was baptism. It was only after emerging from the water that they were considered part of “God’s chosen people.” One rabbi said it was like being “reborn.” Thus, the earliest Christians (who were Jewish) would have recognized this “new life” symbolism of baptism.



SUMMARY: SALVATION AND BAPTISM

At salvation we were **forgiven** (“washed clean”), and raised to **new life** (“a new spirit” within us, the work of God’s Holy Spirit). In baptism we re-enact both our “washing” and our “death and resurrection to new life.” In other words, *baptism celebrates and symbolizes our salvation.*

Baptism is an outward expression of a new, inward reality. I have been saved by trusting in Jesus. I have been washed clean and raised to new life. And now I can celebrate through the New Testament ritual of believer’s baptism.

You see now why it was so natural for the first Christians to be baptized upon their accepting Christ. The ceremony of baptism celebrated what had *already* taken place in their hearts. They had been forgiven, received new life and restored to a right relationship with God.



IF BAPTISM IS JUST A CEREMONY, WHY SHOULD I BOTHER?

Some people might be tempted to ignore baptism if it's "just a ceremony." If baptism is simply a celebration of something that has already happened, is it really that critical that you and I take baptism seriously? Why bother?

- **Because Jesus commanded it (Matthew 28:19-20).** Jesus told His disciples to baptize. If we claim to be true followers of Christ, we can't pick and choose which of His instructions we'll follow. This realization alone should motivate us to be baptized.
- **Because we follow His example (Matthew 3:13-15).** Jesus' willingness to be baptized served as an example to His followers. He did it to identify with us; now we are baptized to identify with Him. Being baptized is like driving a stake in the ground. It's determining in your heart to do as Jesus did (1 John 2:6) and to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). Your baptism as a believer becomes a memorable moment in which you are clearly identifying yourself as a willing follower of Christ.
- **Because it is my testimony (Romans 6:1-7).** It celebrates the core truths of the Gospel. It re-enacts your salvation. Through baptism we publicly identify with Christ's death, burial and resurrection. And it's an opportunity for you to witness to your family and friends and to let them see what God has done in your life.
- **Because it unifies Christians (John 17:20-23).** Baptism is a witness to other believers that you are a member Christ's body – the worldwide community of believers. And Jesus prayed that His followers would be unified.
- **Because it can strengthen your faith.** For many, being baptized can solidify their commitment to living out the rest of their days as a follower of Jesus.



HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M READY?

Salvation is never granted on the basis of our ability to live up to some standard, or prove ourselves worthy. Since baptism is a celebration of salvation, it is not for the spiritual elite, or those who have passed some performance standard. It is for anyone who has received God's free gift. The celebration of baptism is the privilege of anyone who has received Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. If you have given your life over to Jesus, then baptism is your party!

How do you know if you're really a Christian? Accepting Christ's free gift of salvation involves a three-part faith decision:

1. **Accept** the truth that you are totally incapable of earning God's favour. You have sinned. You do not deserve God's acceptance; only judgment and eternal death.
2. **Believe** that Jesus alone is the Way back to God. Only Jesus lived a sinless life, died in your place for your crimes against God, and rose again to life – completing His victory over sin and death.
3. **Commit** your life to Jesus. Place your future into His nail-scarred hands. This is a decision to follow Christ, to trust His love, accept His leadership and to live in dependence on Him instead of yourself.

Often, this decision is expressed through a brief prayer in which you tell God that you know you have failed, that you believe in Jesus, and that you're choosing to follow Him. *If you've never done this, or are unsure, talk to someone who can help you walk through it.* This is the heart decision that water baptism celebrates. Without it, baptism is just an empty ritual with no spiritual value. With it, baptism becomes a joyful celebration of new life and forgiveness.



BAPTISM AT HILLCREST CHURCH

At Hillcrest Church, we practice “Public believer’s baptism by immersion.” What does this mean?

Believer’s Baptism. Baptism that is reserved for those who give evidence of a personal, saving faith in Jesus. While we have no official “minimal age,” you must be old enough to clearly understand and articulate your own faith, and a clear understanding of baptism.

As such, we do not baptize infants. If you were baptized as an infant, the issue of being re-baptized as an adult is a decision that we leave between you and God. For more discussion on infant baptism, see *Appendix B* (p.21).

Baptism by Immersion. We believe that immersion (i.e., going completely under the water) best exemplifies the core themes of baptism (forgiveness, new life). It also seems to be the method used by the early church (Matthew 3:6; Acts 8:38). However, under unique circumstances, we are open to baptizing by another mode (i.e., pouring).

Public Baptism. Romans 12:5 says that all believers belong to the same body, and therefore we belong to each other as well as to God. Christianity is a community life, and baptism is a community celebration. Baptism not only identifies us with Christ, but also with His people. Public baptism honours the community. While there is no minimum number of witnesses necessary, baptism is a declaration to friends, family members, and the world of our decision to follow Christ.



WHAT DO I DO IF I WANT TO BE BAPTIZED?

In order to be baptized we invite you to:

1. Complete this self-study.
2. Let us know you want to be baptized. Talk with one of our pastors, or call the church office.
3. Prepare a brief testimony. One of the great moments of celebration is when your church family gets to hear your story. See *Appendix A: Preparing Your Testimony*.
4. Have an interview with a pastor. This interview will give you the opportunity to express your faith in Christ, ask any further questions you may have about baptism, and to review your prepared testimony.



WHAT WILL HAPPEN AT THE BAPTISM SERVICE?

1. You will enter the baptismal fount (located at the right hand side of the stage) once the previous candidate has come up the stairs and exited the stage. If you are the first candidate to be baptized, the pastor will call you.
2. Once in the fount, the pastor will introduce you to the congregation and ask you to share your testimony, which should be written on 1 sheet of paper and shared in 2 minutes or less. Simply read your testimony from your prepared sheet. (We realize this can be uncomfortable for people, but it's important that the church hear your story so they can celebrate with you. If you suffer from intense stage fright, speak to a pastor about alternate ways to share your testimony). Don't allow fear or stage-fright prevent you from being baptized. God will bless you for your courageous step of faith.
3. When you have finished sharing your testimony, the pastor will proceed to baptize you, based on your confession of faith, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Crossing your arms across your chest, the pastor will guide you gently backwards into the water while supporting you (you may want to hold your nose while you are under the water). You will be submerged briefly under the water, and then immediately lifted back out again.
4. After you exit the stage, you are free to dry off, get dressed, and join us in the service again!



TO REVIEW

Take a moment to answer the following questions.

1. What is baptism? What does it mean to you?
2. What are the main themes of baptism?
3. What aspect of baptism is most meaningful to you, and why?
4. Who qualifies for baptism? Do you qualify for baptism? Why?
5. Why do you want to be baptized at this time?



APPENDIX A: PREPARING YOUR TESTIMONY

In our church, baptismal candidates are invited to give their personal testimony before they are baptized.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus tells His disciples, *“You will be my witness ... to the ends of the earth.”* Peter says in Acts 10:42, *“[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify ...”* And 1 Peter 3:15 says, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is within you.”*

Sharing your testimony:

1. Strengthens your own faith, as you publicly stand for Jesus.
2. Encourages Christians who get to share in the joy of what God has done.
3. Shares Christ with non-Christians who need to hear the difference He makes.

A Testimony Model: Acts 26:1-23

Acts 26 gives us a practical pattern that we can use, following Paul’s example, to share our faith clearly and briefly. Paul’s testimony includes:

1. His past, before he met Christ (vv.4-11).
What was Paul like before he met Jesus?
2. How he met Jesus (vv.12-18).
How did Paul meet Jesus?
3. His life today and how it has changed (vv.19-23).
How did Jesus change Paul?



Testimony Tips

What to do:

1. Ask the Lord to give you wisdom as you write (James 1:5-6).
2. Build your testimony using the outline on the next page.
3. Feel free to include a Scripture verse that is meaningful to you.
4. Focus on the difference Jesus has made in your life.
5. Be honest. Christ does not eliminate every problem, but now the solutions to the problems you are facing may be different.
6. Be encouraging. People need to hear there's hope.

What NOT to do:

1. Make negative comments about a church or people.
2. Mention denominations or organizations.
3. Preach at people.
4. Use gruesome or explicit details that could be embarrassing.
5. Use clichés that non-Christians don't understand (e.g., born again, saved, etc.).
6. Use unimportant details that prolong your testimony.



Testimony Exercise

Complete this worksheet as preparation for writing your testimony:

Before I became a Christian...

Then I received Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. This is what happened...

Now that I have Jesus in my life, things are different (share briefly about a change that has place, like your attitude, fears that are now gone, a miracle, a change in your outlook on life, etc.)

My desire in life now is to:

Now, go back over your notes and edit it into a brief testimony (no more than 1 page long) that you can read or share in less than 2 minutes. Be as concrete as possible without getting sidetracked by little details. Then bring your testimony to your interview so you can review it with the pastor.



APPENDIX B: INFANT BAPTISM

Why do some churches baptize infants, while others don't?

Within the broad range of Christian church traditions there are three basic understandings of baptism. Each understanding has implications on the question of baptizing infants.

1. **Baptism is a means of receiving saving grace.** This traditionally Catholic understanding sees baptism as an actual means of washing away original sin and receiving God's saving grace. Infants need to be baptized to begin the grace process and ensure that they will go to Heaven if they die young. We find this understanding to be inconsistent with the Bible's teaching that faith alone is the means of receiving salvation. No deed, including baptism, imparts salvation or grace.
2. **Baptism is a means of receiving God's covenant.** This perspective, common in Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, views baptism as the New Testament equivalent of circumcision. Baptism becomes the means of "dedicating" the child to God. The child becomes part of the believing community in anticipation that they will come to personal faith in Christ as they grow. While we do practice a form of infant dedication, we do not believe that baptism is the correct ceremony for that time. We do not see the Bible equating baptism with circumcision, or being administered in anticipation of future faith. Rather, baptism seems to follow a conscious decision of faith.
3. **Baptism is a means of expressing salvation.** This view sees baptism as a Christian rite which commemorates and celebrates the inner transformation of an individual by faith in Christ. Baptism is meant to identify all those who have chosen to follow Christ. This is our understanding and practice.



Does the Bible have anything to say about baptizing infants?

Certain passages talk about whole households being baptized, leading some to believe that this included infants. We do not think this interpretation is necessary. For example, consider the following passages.

1. **Cornelius' household is baptized (Acts 10:24-48).** The "household" is also described as his "*relatives and close friends*" (v.24)... "*who heard the message*" (v.44), a phrase which implies understanding. The group described was likely adults; nothing here demands that infants be included among those baptized.
2. **Lydia (Acts 16:11-15).** Lydia, a woman from Thyatira, is in Philippi for business and hears the Gospel along with her "household." This "household" would most likely be assistants and servants who accompanied her on her business ventures. There is no mention of husband, children, or infants among this group. They, along with Lydia, had hearts open "*to respond to Paul's message*" (v.14).
3. **The Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:30-34).** The condition for the jailer's conversion and baptism was that he believed (v.31). However, his belief would not save his household; each individual had to personally believe. The promise is extended to the "household" on the condition that they also believe. In v.32 the apostles spoke the word to his household, implying that the household understood and responded. There is nothing here that demands the presence of infants among those who believed, were saved, or were baptized.
4. **Crispus (Acts 18:8).** We are told that Crispus' "*household ... believed in the Lord*" prior to their baptism. Baptism follows conscious faith. Nothing demands that infants were baptized here.

As you can see, a case can be made that none of the passages often cited to support infant baptism demand that infants were in fact baptized. In each case, baptism followed a conscious belief which infants do not express.



Does this mean I have to be re-baptized if I was baptized as an infant?

This is a decision we leave between you and God. In Acts 19:1-7, the disciples readily re-baptized some of John the Baptist's followers when they understood the fuller message of Christ. They had no qualms about supplementing John's *legitimate* baptism with a *fuller* baptism in Christ's name.

At the same time, we do not want to argue over long-standing baptism traditions. Therefore, we do not demand re-baptism. You need to examine the Bible's teaching for yourself, and pray that God will lead you to the most meaningful decision regarding this issue.



APPENDIX C: PREPARING FOR THE BAPTISM SERVICE

1. Pray about your baptism, that it will be a truly meaningful experience for you and for those you invite (e.g., your family and friends).
2. Make a list of family friends you want to invite.
3. You will be baptized in your own clothing. Regular street clothes, dress clothes, T-shirts & shorts are all acceptable, as long as they are appropriate (pictures, logos, sayings, style, etc.) and modest (appropriate coverage, doesn't become transparent when wet, etc.). Some people wear a bathing suit under their clothes. Wear minimal jewelry. Makeup should be waterproof. You can wear your glasses into the tank, and remove them before your baptism.
4. Bring a change of clothing, a towel or two, and a hair dryer toiletries. Don't forget undergarments during baptism and after.
5. The washrooms located in back hallway at the southeast corner of the Worship Centre (near the choir room) will be used as change rooms for the baptismal service. Hooks for hanging your clothes are on the walls.
6. The baptismal fount is located at the southeast corner of the Worship Centre stage. The entrance is located off the hallway that runs behind the Worship Centre. You will descend into the fount using a stairwell and ascend from the fount using the same stairwell.



APPENDIX D: SCRIPTURES USED IN THIS STUDY¹

Ezekiel 36:25-27 (NIV)

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

John 3:3-6 (NIV)

³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” ⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”

Titus 3:5 (NIV)

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 22:16 (NIV)

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

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1 Peter 3:18-22 (NIV)

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

Romans 6:1-7 (NIV)

¹ What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Colossians 2:12 (NIV)

Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.



ANSWERS TO QUESTION BOXES

Page 5

- The new believers in Acts were baptized *as soon as possible*, in most cases even *immediately* after believing.

Page 7

- He will cleanse them with water.
- He will give them a new heart and put a new Spirit within.
- “Water” is a symbol of forgiveness.
- “Spirit” is the agent of new life.

Page 8

- Washing of rebirth.
- Renewal by the Holy Spirit.
- Forgiveness.
- New Life.

Page 9

- The washing away of sins.

Page 10

- Baptism marks our death and resurrection with Christ.

