



# Christian Baptism

## Elder Position Paper

This short position paper seeks to articulate what the elders of Sun Valley Church teach regarding the precious sacrament<sup>1</sup> of Christian baptism. The first appearance of any kind of baptism in the New Testament is with John the Baptist's ministry in preparing the way for Christ (Matt 3:1-6). As the Apostle Paul makes clear in his Ephesian ministry, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus" (Acts 19:4).<sup>2</sup> John's baptism was not Christian baptism, but a preparatory baptism that John conducted as the last prophet ministering under the Old Covenant before Christ. Christian baptism is a reality and gift under the New Covenant, which covenant was inaugurated by Christ at the Last Supper and ratified in the shedding of His blood on the cross (Lk 22:20; Heb 9:11ff). Jesus commanded Christian baptism to be administered under the New Covenant beginning with the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).

Christian baptism's primary meaning is to picture the believer's *union with Christ*. Baptism signifies that a believer has been crucified with Christ, buried with Him in His death, and raised to newness of life with Christ (Jn 3:1-8; Rom 6:1-5). This is why the New Testament repeatedly refers to baptism as being "into Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:3). Furthermore, water baptism signifies the cleansing and purification from the guilt and penalty of sin that the believer experiences through the Gospel (Acts 2:37-38, 22:16). It is a witness of the one baptized to their having received these spiritual benefits through faith in Christ. Baptism's object is the finished work of Christ.

Regarding the administration of Christian baptism, we understand the example of the early Church and the language of the New Testament to communicate full immersion. The First London Baptist Confession (1646) articulates this conviction: "That the way and manner of dispensing this ordinance, is dipping or plunging the body under water; it being a sign, must answer the things signified, which is, that interest the saints have in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ..." (XL).<sup>3</sup> We understand baptism as a sacrament to logically precede participation in the Lord's Supper,<sup>4</sup> and should be administered only once as a sign of the once-for-all union believers have with Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> As the Westminster Confession of Faith explains (27.1), a *sacrament* (of which there are two—baptism and the Lord's Supper) is a holy sign and seal that represents Christ, His benefits, and the interest of believers in Him.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from the Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> While Sun Valley Church practices baptism by immersion, the elders recognize baptism of a believer by other forms under the authority of the elders of a local church to be a valid Christian baptism.

Sun Valley Church practices *credobaptism* (believer's baptism) rather than *paedobaptism* (baptism of believers as well as the infant children of at least one believing parent). We recognize that the practice of infant baptism extends back at least to the mid-second century, and the practice is nowhere commanded nor prohibited in the New Testament. We want to extend true charity to those who hold to the historic practice of paedobaptism while humbly maintaining the conviction that the New Testament practice of baptism is for believers only. If infant baptism is valid, biblical grounds must exist for proving that this is the expectation of God for His people under the New Covenant, yet we believe such grounds are lacking. In one of the key passages used to claim that New Covenant baptism is the direct counterpart of Old Covenant circumcision (and therefore to be administered to infants)—Colossians 2:11-12—Paul actually makes the claim that the circumcision of the heart and its association with baptism is a sign of the personal salvation of the one baptized: "... having been buried with Him in baptism, *in which you were also raised with Him through faith...*" (v 12). Infants are unable to exercise faith in Christ and repentance from sin, which would preclude them from Christian baptism until such time as they may trust in Christ and turn from sin.

The fact that baptism is the sign of the New Covenant (as circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant) is a strong indication that it should only be given to those professing credible faith in the Christ of the New Covenant. The New Covenant is not like the Old (Heb 8:8-9) and is explicitly a covenant in which all members of the covenant community savingly know the Lord: "'for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest'" (Heb 8:11; Jer 31:34). This is different from Israel under the Old Covenant, where all male community members were circumcised yet multitudes did not know God savingly. While circumcision was to be administered to all male members of ethnic Israelite descent shortly after birth, baptism is to be administered to all members of the New Covenant Church shortly after the New Birth (Tit 3:4-5). The household baptisms of the New Testament also indicate that those baptized all embraced the Gospel: the Philippian jailer's entire household *rejoiced* (a response of faith to the Gospel) that he had believed (Ac 16:34), and the baptized household of Stephanas were all active in ministry (1 Cor 1:16, 16:15). Lastly, the promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 is said by Peter to be "'for you and for your children and for all who are far off, *everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself*" (v 39). Therefore, by the regenerative nature of the New Covenant, the examples of the New Testament, as well as the teaching of the Apostles on baptism's meaning and significance, we hold that Christian baptism is for believers only and should not be administered to children until such time as they are called by God, repent, and believe in the Gospel (Mk 1:15).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed upon persons professing faith, or that are made disciples; who upon profession of faith, ought to be baptized, and after to partake of the Lord's Supper." (First London Baptist Confession, 1646, XXXIX)

<sup>5</sup> Helpful resources in preparing this position paper include: Martyn Llyod-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible, Vol. 3: The Church and the Last Things* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 35-46; John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul, "Baptism Debate with R. C. Sproul and John MacArthur" (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1997), <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/baptism-debate/credobaptist-position>; James White and Gregg Strawbridge, "The Baptism Debate James White vs Gregg Strawbridge" June 23, 2015, Alpha & Omega Ministries, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXSPKjypoO8>; R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019), 590-602; and W. Gary Crampton, *From Paedobaptism to Credobaptism: A Critique of the Westminster Standards on the Subjects of Baptism* (Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010).