

LIFEGROUP LESSON



Beyond Getting Wet Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 6:3-4; Acts 2:41

TIPS FOR DISCUSSION FACILITATOR

Ensure that the aim is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. The discussion questions provided are intended to bring out the relevance for today.

Begin with a prayer for the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Encourage everyone to participate in the discussion.

Begin the discussion by reading the sermon passage (where applicable), and discuss about its overall meaning by asking what could be the key focuses/emphases in that particular passage.

Spend appropriate amount of time on each question with as many members as possible making a contribution. At the end of each discussion the leader should summarise the main points that have arisen and direct the group towards making them applicable in their individual lives.

A balance must be kept between ascertaining what the Bible teaches and what are the opinions of participants. So the facilitator should make sure that there is an understanding of the passage before questions are raised.

MESSAGE OUTLINE

Being water baptised is a ...

1. Physical Evidence of Our Gratitude (Matthew 28:19-20)
2. Personal Confession of Our Belief (Romans 6:3-4)
3. Public Declaration of Our Commitment (Acts 2:41)

Historical Development of Water Baptism

The Greek term baptizo generally means “to dip,” “to wash,” or “to immerse,” but it is also often used to signify a religious rite for ritual cleansing. In Judaism there were different forms of ritual washing, including the proselyte baptism. In the New Testament time, water baptism eventually became the rite of initiation into the Christian community. The following traces the various forms of “baptism” prior to the institution of the Christian water baptism during the time of the early Church:

Proselyte Baptism

Prior to the times of Jesus, converts from pagan religions were admitted to Judaism only after fulfilling certain obligations, which included the study of the Torah, circumcision (for males), and a ritual bath to wash away the impurities of their gentile background. The parallels between this and the Christian practice are easily observable: the act as an initiation rite, similar terminology, similar theology (i.e. the person was considered reborn).

The Baptism of John

John preached a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). The origins of his rite are difficult to trace, for there are both parallels and differences with earlier Jewish forms of ceremonial washing. John’s practice had several obvious connections to that of the early church, but we cannot confirm absolute dependence. In fact, it disappeared from Jesus ministry. At first, Jesus allowed His disciples to continue the rite (John 3:22), but later He seemingly discontinued the practice (John 4:1–3).

The Baptism of Jesus

Jesus allowing Himself to be baptized by John (His cousin) was Jesus’ stamp of approval upon John’s message and ministry, thereby showing that He was in continuity with John’s kingdom proclamation. For Jesus, it was also an anointing which signified the inauguration of His messianic ministry. From the standpoint of humanity, the event signifies Jesus’ identification with our sin and suffering, and showed His solidarity with us as sinners.

Jesus’ Resurrection Command

As already stated, the disciples seemingly stopped employing water baptism during Jesus’ earthly ministry, so it is in Jesus’ post-resurrection command (Matthew 28:19-20) that we see the institution reconstituted as an ordinance based on the death and resurrection of Christ. It was no longer a forward-looking phenomenon but had now become a realized activity centring on the Gospel message.

Discussion for Point 1: Physical Evidence of Our Gratitude (Matthew 28:19-20)

- How do you usually express your gratitude to those around you? What are some practical ways believers can express their gratitude towards God? The preacher said that our gratitude should not remain as a feeling and has to translate into tangible action. What can happen if believers merely harbour “grateful feelings” without expressing them to God in a tangible way? Our trust in God (and thus our obedience) is the best expression of our gratitude to what Christ has done on the cross. Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer. Read Romans 12:1-2. In what ways is God currently challenging you to express your gratitude to Him by trusting in what He has commanded? How can the LG support one another to live out our gratitude towards God through our tangible obedience to what He has instructed us?

Discussion for Point 2: Personal Confession of Our Belief (Romans 6:3-4)

- According to Paul, water baptism is meant to symbolize that the old me is undesirable, but what Jesus did for me on the Cross eventually cleansed me and gave me a new life. Do you agree that the “old you” is undesirable? Give reasons for your answer. According to the symbolism of water baptism, what has happened to the “old you”? In contrast, what is the “new you” supposed to be like? Read Ephesians 4:22-24. What can happen if you try to live out your Christian life without a clear understanding of the “old/new you”? How has this belief resulted in changes on how you conduct yourself or how you relate with others? In what specific ways can you live out more of the “new you” in your life? How can the LG community participate to help one another to live out more of this newness in our lives?

Discussion for Point 3: Public Declaration of Our Commitment (Acts 2:41)

- What are some of the common fears that believers might have in letting other people know about their faith in Christ? In what ways is it “easier” for believers to keep their faith in Christ “private”? Do you think this is what God desires of us, i.e. to keep our faith in Him private? Give reasons for your answer. What are some possible reasons why it is important for believers to be honest (and sometimes even upfront) about their faith to those around them? What can happen if believers are not public about their faith, i.e. how might it affect them and those around them? On the other hand, what can result if believers are not sensitive to those around them when they go public with their faith? Water baptism is one of the first few things believers can do to be more public about their faith to those around them. What are some other practical things you can do in order to live your commitment in Christ in a more public, and yet non-offensive, manner?

In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 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.

~ Colossians 2:11-12 ~

Appendix A (For general reading and reflection)

Concerning Baptism

Answers to frequently asked questions

By Clint Arnold,

(Adapted from Discipleship Journal, <http://www.navpress.com/magazines/archives/article.aspx?id=21454>)

I was baptized as a teenager shortly after coming to Christ, but it didn't quite do the job. Or so I feared. As my elderly pastor attempted to lower me into the water, I felt his arms give way; I had to stand up quickly to avoid making a huge splash and a big scene. As a result, my head never made it under the water.

Later, I asked my pastor if my baptism might have been inadequate. He assured me that it was sufficient. The water did not do anything to cleanse me of my sins, he explained; it was simply a picture of the cleansing Jesus had already accomplished when I put my faith in Him.

Misconceptions and questions about baptism abound. Earnest, Bible-believing Christians hold different opinions on the method and meaning of this rite.

Let's explore some common questions about baptism.

What does the word *baptize* mean?

The word *baptism* is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo*, which means to dip, submerge, or immerse. Dipping a cloth into a pot of water to dye it was referred to as a "baptism." A boat taking on water and sinking was being "baptized." Even a drowning person was experiencing "baptism." A less common use of *baptizo* referred to the act of bathing or washing.

What does baptism symbolize?

While baptism is almost universally practiced in Christian churches, its symbolic message may be understood differently.

Some Christians (Baptists, Charismatics, and many independent churches, for example) teach that baptism symbolizes the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. They look to passages such as **Romans 6:3-4** to explain the purpose and meaning of this rite:

Or have you forgotten that when we became Christians and were baptized to become one with Christ Jesus, we died with him? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

For these believers, the immersion in water depicts our union with Christ in His death, and the rising up from the water is a picture of our resurrection with Christ to a new life. Baptism serves as a public declaration of this identification with Christ.

Another group of Christians (such as Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians) view baptism as the New Covenant counterpart to circumcision, which was the principal symbol of membership in the Old Covenant. God instructed Abraham to circumcise every male infant as a sign of God's covenant with him and his descendants (**Genesis 17:9-14**). This instruction was repeated in the Mosaic law God (**Leviticus 12:3**). The same rite was to be performed on any foreigner who desired to join Israel (**Exodus 12:48**). Now that Christ is the fulfillment of the law of Moses and has inaugurated a new covenant, He has established a new symbol of covenant membership: baptism. Adherents of this view point to passages such as **Colossians 2:11-13**:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.

Based on this understanding of baptism, these believers consider it appropriate to baptize infants, just as the Israelites circumcised male children when they were eight days old.

What does baptism do for us?

The Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant churches view baptism as more than a symbolic rite; they believe it actually conveys God's saving grace to people. Thus, baptism becomes essential for salvation. They would point to a passage such as **1 Peter 3:19-21** to support this view:

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, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On the surface, the passage appears to teach that baptism is necessary for salvation: "baptism...now saves you." But the second part of the passage seems to clarify that it is not the water that cleanses, but the "pledge of a good conscience toward God." This points to putting one's faith in God for the forgiveness of sins. The baptism merely refers back to an action that has already occurred when a person puts his or her faith in Christ and receives "the free gift of...eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (**Romans 6:23, NLT**).

While baptism does not impart salvation, it is nonetheless a grace-filled experience for many people. As believers are baptized, they are often deeply touched with joy and with heartfelt gratitude to God for His extraordinary grace in their lives. Their faith is strengthened and deepened.

Do I really need to be baptized?

If the act of baptism does not actually save anyone, it would seem that a person need not be baptized. However, Jesus explicitly commanded baptism for His followers (**Matthew 28:19-20**):

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.—

This is why many Protestant denominations refer to baptism as an "ordinance" (an authoritative command or order). Throughout the book of Acts, we see a pattern: People put their faith in Christ, and then they are baptized. Sometimes this happened quickly; the Ethiopian man was baptized on the same day he was converted (**Acts 8:26-40**).

What form of baptism is biblical?

Baptism is most commonly practiced through a person's immersion into water or through the sprinkling or pouring of water over a person's head.

If we focus on the symbolism of dying and rising with Christ (which is best depicted by going under the water and rising out of it) and on the usage of the word *baptizo* that refers to submerging something, then immersion appears to have more biblical support.

On the other hand, if we emphasize baptism as the counterpart to circumcision and stress the usage of *baptizo* as "washing," then sprinkling or pouring is a viable expression of baptism.

The difficulty is that none of the stories of baptisms in the New Testament show one or the other options to be clearly superior. For instance, when Philip baptized the Ethiopian, the text simply says, "Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (**Acts 8:38**). If the text had said, "They went down into the water where Philip filled a jug and poured the water over the head of the Ethiopian" or "They waded out into the water, and Philip lowered him into the river," then we would have a precise answer to our question.

In short, Scripture ordains the act of baptism but not the method.

Is a baptized infant saved?

The New Testament clearly teaches that people are saved by placing their faith in Jesus Christ. Neither circumcision nor baptism—both being "works"—can bestow salvation. Thus, people who are baptized as infants will need to put their faith in Christ when they are older in order to be saved.

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.—Ephesians 2:8-9

Do I need to be baptized again if I was baptized as a baby?

This is a matter of conscience and conviction as well as church policy. Your church may have its own guidelines on this matter. Some people are rebaptized as adults out of a strong conviction that Scripture teaches "believer's baptism" (and not infant baptism). There was a movement in the church during the time of the Reformation that reached this conclusion; members of this movement were called "Anabaptists" (the term means "baptized again"). Other believers choose to be rebaptized as a public testimony of their faith in Christ for salvation.

Vivid Imagery

Baptism is a means of experiencing with our senses the blessings of grace we have received from God through Christ. Whatever form it takes, this rite sets us apart as people who have had our lives uniquely touched by God. Every baptism we witness is an opportunity to savor the wonder of salvation and to worship the God from whom that salvation flows.